COMMISSIONER JAMES GORDON *aka*

The WHISPERER

TWO HARD-BOILED CRIME NOVELS *plus* a magical tale by *The Shadow's* Maxwell Grant

EVENING STAR, SEPT.

"THE MURDER QUEENS"

The Whisperer, according to police, has much to do with the new epidemic of deaths attributed to "The Murder Queens." Whatever the answer is the police are determined to bring The Whisperer to justice.

MURDER QUEENS

by Clifford Goodrich

KILL THEM FIRST!

Murder Queens, Kill Them First! *and* The Air-Mail Murders

THREE HARD-BOILED ADVENTURES OF *The* WHISPERER

by Laurence Donovan and Alan Hathway
writing as Clifford Goodrich

plus "The Blue Pearls"—a Norgil mystery
by Walter B. Gibson writing as Maxwell Grant

with a new historical essay
by Will Murray

SANCTUM BOOKS

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THREE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF THE GRAY WRAITH

The WHISPERER

Volume 3

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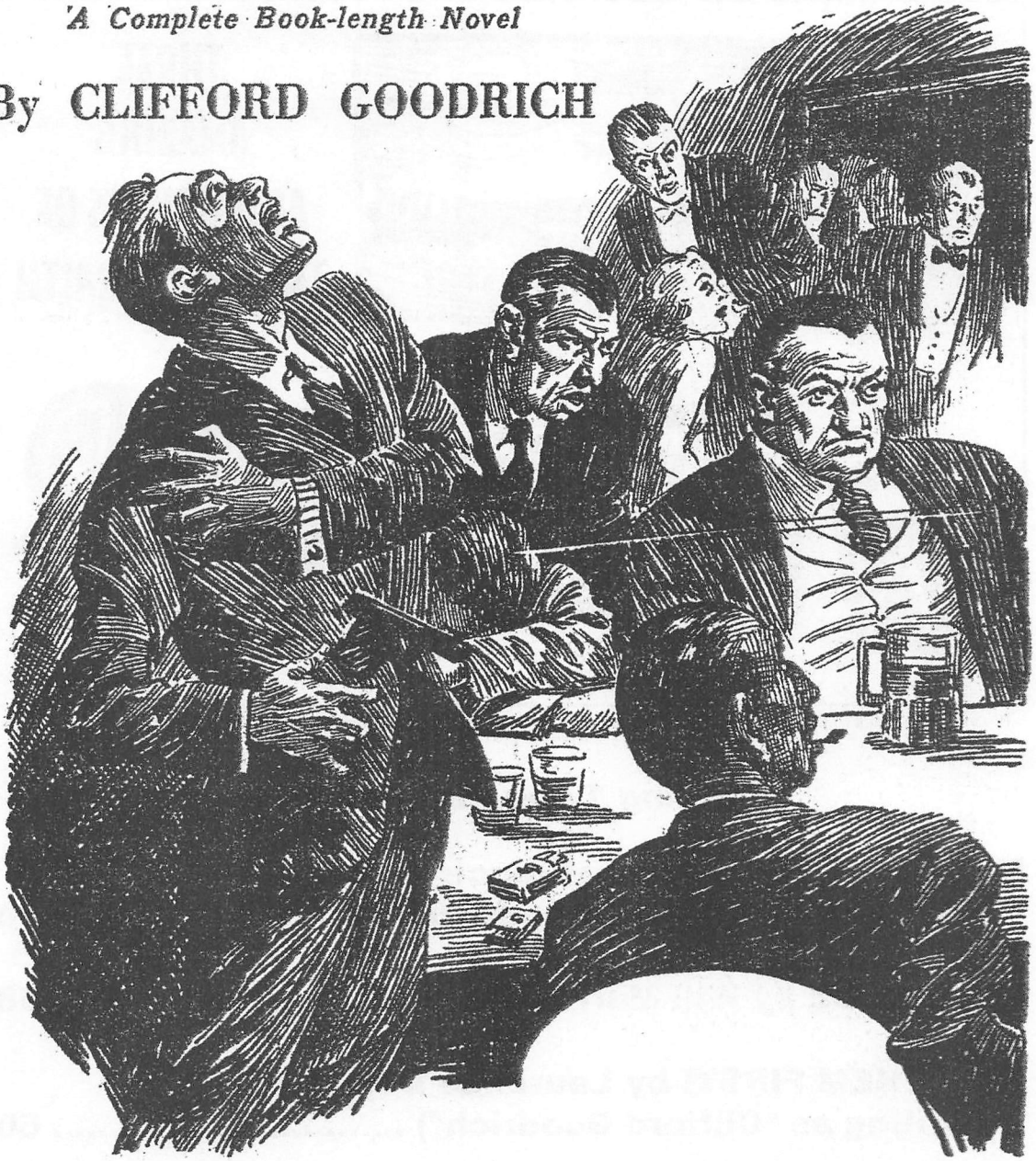
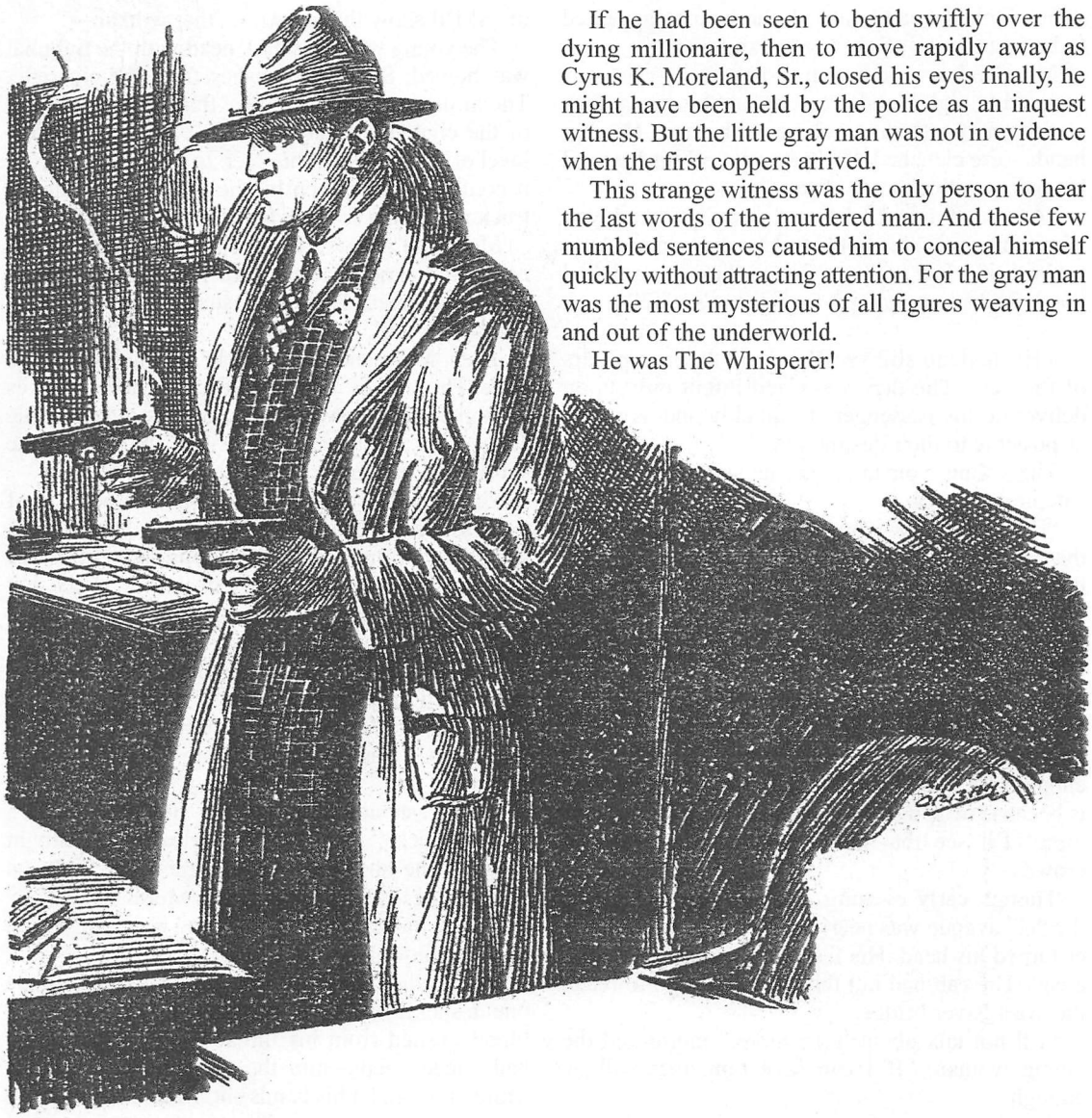
A Complete Book-length Novel

By CLIFFORD GOODRICH



MURDER QUEENS

[A game of death to get great wealth—a game The Whisperer smashed when he sat in the play with a winning hand for justice!]



If he had been seen to bend swiftly over the dying millionaire, then to move rapidly away as Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., closed his eyes finally, he might have been held by the police as an inquest witness. But the little gray man was not in evidence when the first coppers arrived.

This strange witness was the only person to hear the last words of the murdered man. And these few mumbled sentences caused him to conceal himself quickly without attracting attention. For the gray man was the most mysterious of all figures weaving in and out of the underworld.

He was The Whisperer!

CHAPTER I
CIGARETTE OF DEATH

CYRUS K. MORELAND, SR., was the first to die. He did not live long enough to know that it had been murder. Moreland, a retired millionaire, was conscious less than two minutes after his body was mortally broken and battered. He died believing himself the victim of an accident.

A few other persons knew that it had been murder. All but one of these were involved in the brutal killing. The one other person who chanced upon the truth seemed to be a queer, inconsequential character. He was a denizen at the moment of the underworld. An apparently furtive man clad all in gray, whose attire so blended him with the rainy night that he moved into and out of the murder scene unnoticed.

The message he had received from the white lips of the murdered man told him the motive of this crime must be sought elsewhere. That it would be wisdom for the time being to permit the police to believe this had been the accident it was intended to appear.

Less than five minutes before the killers sent Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., to his doom in a dead-end street of the waterfront, the millionaire sat beside a young woman in the seat of a taxicab. Freezing rain had converted an "el" avenue into an icy glare. The taxicab lurched and skidded. Its driver piloted it skillfully past iron pillars of the elevated tracks.

The young woman beside Moreland wore a green raincoat. This concealed all but a flowerlike, vivid face with glowing dark eyes. A tight hat was pulled over glossy black hair. Except for her eyes,

which looked steadily ahead, the woman appeared to be in a tremor of excitement and fright.

Moreland was a big man physically. He was inclined to high blood pressure, and his heavy face at this moment was choleric with rage. His big hands were clenched. He had swept off his hat, and his hair was thick and white.

"A son of mine!" he said heavily. "And you admit that you care about him! You would not have told me, if it had not been for another woman! And you have had no thought for my son's wife!"

THE taxicab slid swiftly along the iron pillars of the "el." The driver seemed intent only upon delivering his passengers as quickly and as safely as possible to their destination.

The young woman spoke, unhappily, her voice catching on a sob.

"I've done very wrong to care about him, but all that is too late now. He told me he was in trouble, that he must pretend to go on with this—this other woman—or he would be ruined and disgraced. He said he was forced to go over there tonight, and that if he could not settle—well, he would not come back—that's—"

"Yes! Yes!" interrupted Moreland testily. "You told me all that before! What he has done isn't enough! He would kill himself! And you think that is because of you and not his wife? Don't talk anymore! I'll see that he disappears! I'll stop that crowd—"

Though early evening, because of the icy rain the "el" avenue was nearly deserted. The taxi driver turned his head. His face was half concealed by a cap. The cab had but three blocks to go to reach the West River bridge.

"I'll not talk about it anymore," murmured the young woman. "If I can save him, that will be enough."

The dark eyes were upon the driver of the taxi. The young woman must have caught his quick glance into the windshield mirror. She turned her head slightly. A heavy truck with dim headlights had boomed into the avenue, following the slippery surface tracks behind the taxicab.

A deep sigh broke from the young woman's reddened lips. A cigarette and a lighter appeared in her hands. The lighter flamed, went out, flamed the second time before she inhaled deeply from the cigarette.

At this, the taxicab slued slightly, the driver turning into a narrow street flanked by darkened brick tenements. Perhaps Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., was too absorbed with his own bitterness to note this was not the street leading to the bridge. The millionaire was muttering.

"Brainless, young nincompoop! Disgracing all of us! I'll show that crowd — that woman—"

The young woman's dark head with the tight hat was bowed. She flicked ashes from the cigarette. The millionaire did not notice that the glowing end of the cigarette described a little circle above the level of the woman's shoulder. In the darkened taxi, it could easily be seen by the driver of the heavy truck now but a few yards behind the cab.

Moreland glanced out the window. Still he did not seem to know the cab had entered the dead-end tenement street. This street stopped abruptly at a low, stone wall.

Then Moreland was nearly pitched from the seat. The driver had applied the taxi's brakes abruptly. The cab swung around. Like a formidable Juggernaut, the heavy truck rolled swiftly into the short block behind it.

Possibly the murder victim saw the coming of the crash, and he may not have. The young woman had slipped from beside him, going lightly through the door beside her. She fell in the icy street, but recovered instantly and sprang lightly to the sidewalk.

The taxi driver rolled from his seat in the opposite direction. The driver of the truck bounded to the pavement. He hit on his feet, running. The massive truck smashed on, with no lessening of its speed.

The crash could have been heard for half a dozen blocks. The lighter taxicab was caught between the hurtling truck and the stone wall. Its yellow sides collapsed. Cyrus K. Moreland's heavy body was hurled through crackling glass and metal, striking the wall.

The millionaire was still conscious. He made one desperate effort to pull himself to his feet. But blood gushed from his throat where jagged glass had sliced deeply into the thick flesh. Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., let his hands slip from the wall as he dropped down, attempting to stop the gushing blood with his clenched fingers.

THE WHISPERER was at this moment in a poorly furnished room on the third floor of a disreputable tenement building. He was feeding a dog that was a coal-black bundle with burning eyes and white fangs in a vicious mouth. The dog was a Scottish terrier. When The Whisperer spoke to him, he called him Brian Boru.

The Whisperer's face was odd and long, with a queerly pointed chin. His voice was low and huskily close to a whisper. Yet it filled the small, unsavory room. A whitish blur of hair was topped by a round-brimmed hat.

There was another, older man in the room. A man in his sixties, with a bald head relieved only by tufts of iron-gray hair over his ears. None would have

suspected that this companion of The Whisperer was Dick Traeger, long known, before his retirement, as "Quick Trigger," one of the city's most efficient police deputies.

Old Quick Trigger was saying, "I reckon it would be best to end all this. We would get a home for Brian Boru in the country. Someday the dog will put the finger on you, and that will be the end of—"

The sentence never was completed. Screaming brakes of a car in the narrow street below jerked The Whisperer around. He whipped to a dingy window with catlike quickness. One fist smashed out a pane of glass. But he was not quick enough to see what happened before the rending death crash resounded through the block.

There would have been no visibility in the icy rain below, had not the headlights of the taxicab freakishly remained burning. Into their beams flashed the lightly running figure of a woman.

The Whisperer had but one glimpse of a green raincoat and a dark head, above which bobbed three gleaming pendants of a tight hat. Then the woman was out of the light glare and vanishing along the buildings.

The truck's heavy hood was thrust nearly through the taxicab. Two shadowy figures were fleeing across the street. They were taking a direction different from that of the woman. The Whisperer's hand went inside his coat, came out with a long pistol. The barrel of this was enclosed by a cylinder.

Police Commissioner JAMES "WILDCAT" GORDON

The hand of the older man fastened on his arm with an iron grip.

"Don't be a damn fool!" he gritted out. "You don't know—"

Perhaps The Whisperer would have fired at the two men fleeing from the wreck, but old Quick Trigger's intervention threw the pistol to one side.

"The hell I don't know! It's murder! See that man in the light by the wall? Stay here, Quick Trigger!"

"No, don't go down there!" said the older man. "The police will be right on top of this, and you will be seen—"

But The Whisperer already was out the door and halfway down the rickety stairs. A frowzy woman poked her head out of a lower door, but she saw The Whisperer and withdrew quickly. In this dubious neighborhood it was safest to know little of what might be happening.

And for that same reason, faces appeared at many windows along the block, but doors did not open at once. The police would be arriving after that startling crash. The majority of the tenements of this dead-end street had little desire to become witnesses to any trouble, or otherwise bring themselves to the attention of the coppers.

Except for the sudden wailing of a radio-car siren some distance away, nearly two minutes elapsed with no person but the dying man beside the wall and The Whisperer in the dark block. The Whisperer reached the injured man. A hoarse oath hissed from between his teeth.

That deeply red blood flowing over the man's fingers told its own story. The Whisperer smashed out both lights of the wrecked taxi. He got an arm under the victim's head and put a flask to his lips. But Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., could not swallow the brandy.

"No—I'm done for whoever you are—my son—"

The words were a bloody mumble. The man gasped out his name, and The Whisperer swore silently.

Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr.! One of the city's richest and most respected citizens!

"Tell me, who was the woman?" asked The Whisperer grimly.

The dying millionaire's brain already was fogged by creeping death. It may have been that he could not hear. Or there might have been a last spark of chivalry for the woman who had fled, or a desperate thought to avert as much disgrace for his family as possible.

Moreland did not speak the young woman's name. He continued to mumble weakly.

"My son's wife—she must not find out—see her—tell her—"

Moreland's eyes closed. The Whisperer placed an ear to his lips to catch three death words.

"Random—Club—son—"

The millionaire's hand fell away from his throat. His head became dead weight. The Whisperer glided

into the areaway of a basement as a police car rocked into the block.

Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., had not realized that he had been murdered. He had died with but one thought: for his son.

FOUR policemen surged into the lights of their own car. The Whisperer crouched, listening, a grim and ghostly chuckle coming from his throat.

The dead man was quickly identified. A few pedestrians from the avenue had now followed the police car to the scene of the wreck. But none could offer any account of what had happened.

"Damned hit-runners!" swore one policeman. But we'll get 'em! It'll be manslaughter! I'll grab a phone and have the cab and truck numbers checked!"

"Which will get you exactly nowhere," murmured The Whisperer.

He did not need to be informed what the police would discover. The taxicab would be a hot car. The truck licenses would be phonies. In a few minutes, one of the better brains among the cops would hit upon the truth.

A taxicab would not have been so conveniently located against a wall in a dead-end street if this had been accident. At least one of the drillers would have suffered injury in the complete smashup.

The Whisperer left the visible mystery to the policemen. He faded into a basement doorway. Three minutes later, he was in the room with old Quick Trigger and the dog, Brian Boru.

"We'd do well to be out of this," suggested Quick Trigger. "Maybe some of the boys will get hot enough to start combing the block, thinking somebody saw more than they have been told. If they come upon us here—"

The Whisperer said, "We're getting out all right, and fast, Quick Trigger. It's murder. Cyrus Moreland, and it may be a simple case of some woman's sweet idea. But I'm thinking it's more likely a damnable setup that goes right into a combination I've been feeling for—the Random Political Club."

"What, Wildcat? That's dynamite, anything connected with the Random Club!" exclaimed Quick Trigger. "As long as Slicks Murphy plays ball with the boss of West Borough, you'll not root him out! Other police commissioners before you have clashed with Big Charley Vuldoon! How could this have any connection with something ten miles away?"

CHAPTER II
MAID OF MYSTERY

OLD Quick Trigger had spoken of other police commissioners. The Whisperer was locking the dog, Brian Boru, into a closet. As the door closed, the round-brimmed hat and the white, blurry hue were removed from a head of rusty hair. The Whisperer's fingers slipped into his mouth.

A strange dental plate came out. The long, pointed chin instantly became square and hard. The Whisperer's hands moved swiftly over his gray garments that had made him a humble, furtive figure. Within a minute, he was revealed in a flashy suit of brown that would have delighted a resident of Harlem.

An army hat was produced and cocked over one eye. A new, red necktie and a fresh carnation matching it in his coat lapel, shoes of the brightest yellow and a swaggering, but cold-eyed man had replaced The Whisperer.

For The Whisperer was none other than James "Wildcat" Gordon, commissioner of police. A commissioner who had been an army officer and who feared neither man nor the devil. With the dental plate removed, the square, fighting block of his face was made more deadly by the almost colorless eyes. Texas eyes.

And this was the man, the brain inside The Whisperer who had become notoriously feared in the underworld, yet hunted from time to time by his own police as a supercrook.

Old Quick Trigger muttered, "Wildcat, you don't mean you're going after the Random Club—Slicks Murphy—Big Charley Vuldoon? West Borough has run its business too long. I had been hoping you would keep out of the Vuldoon pot. Why in hell did I ever make that crazy dental plate?"

Quick Trigger had created The Whisperer, somewhat by accident. For many years, before and since his retirement from the police department, old Quick Trigger had taken the place of a father to the fiery Wildcat Gordon. When he had come from the army, it had been Quick Trigger who had got him on the force.

Quick Trigger had one hobby: the creation of odd disguises. Faced by a city alive with rackets and defiant mobsters and political bosses, Wildcat had adopted his own methods of striking where the letter of the law could not support him as police commissioner. The dental plate made by old Quick Trigger had a queer result. One that had become a terror among the worst of the city's killers.

Though thoroughly disguised, and living in various places under the common name of D. Smith, Wildcat Gordon became distinguished for the eerie, deadly, whispering voice that struck fear to his enemies when he acted. The dental plate was responsible.

Wildcat Gordon now led the way down a back stairs from the tenement. The pair entered a plain coupé parked in an adjoining street. In all, not more than fifteen minutes had elapsed since the murder crash.

Wildcat's only reply to Quick Trigger's protest against his announced intention to pry into the affairs of the Random Political Club, "Slicks" Murphy and "Big Charley" Vuldoon, boss of West Borough, had been a grim smile.

"First, Quick Trigger, there's a woman to find, and some bad news to break at the home of Cyrus Moreland, Jr., the old man's son," stated Wildcat. "It may be that the son's wife can furnish some clue. So I am contacting headquarters, and then we'll call officially."

Across town, in a suburban section, Wildcat slipped into a telephone booth. His call brought his trusted standby in the department to the connection. This man was Detective Sergeant Thorsen, a former army sergeant.

A wooden-faced man, seldom betraying an emotion, Sergeant Thorsen had, from the first, obeyed Wildcat Gordon's sometimes inexplicable commands implicitly. His army training did that. Wildcat was his commanding officer, come hell or high water.

Wildcat swiftly detailed some circumstances of the "accident" in which Cyrus Moreland, Sr., had died. He followed this with an order.

"Pick a squad for West Borough, and have them in the block north of the Random Political Club at midnight!"

"Right!" said Sergeant Thorsen. "As you suspect, the license number of the death truck is a phony, and the taxicab was a hot car. Deputy Bolton is trying to trace the missing drivers, but has got nowhere."

"He probably won't," said Wildcat grimly. "Stand by at the Random Political Club!"

THE rambling residence of Cyrus Moreland, Jr., son of the murdered millionaire, was ablaze with lights. The strains of an orchestra came from within. The residence stood among the trees of the suburban estate.

A stiff-necked butler elevated his chin as Wildcat Gordon requested to see Mrs. Cyrus Moreland, Jr., at once and alone. The butler's scornful eyes passed over Wildcat's gorgeous raiment to the grisly appearance of old Quick Trigger, whose suit never was pressed.

Through the hallway it could be seen that the small ballroom of the residence was filled with dancers. The butler strode stiffly away when informed of Wildcat Gordon's identity.

The young Mrs. Moreland came into a small reception room where Wildcat and Quick Trigger waited. She was a pretty woman, but with lines in her face that should not have been there. Wildcat had asked to see her alone. But another woman accompanied her into the room.

This second woman was a striking figure. She had all the beauty of a perfectly molded statue. And the statue of her graceful figure was bedecked with a small fortune in the rarest of jewels. These were diamonds, except for a single pigeon-blood ruby and an equally valuable emerald set into a necklace and a bracelet.

Wildcat did not need Mrs. Moreland's quick introduction. Even a police commissioner sometimes finds interesting items in the society pages. This statuesque woman, with her strong, beautiful face, and an air of being aware of her social importance, was Mrs. J. Cortland of Lake Avenue Drive.

The Mrs. J. Cortland, whose gem-encrusted, ivory-framed lorgnette was one of the few still in existence. Mrs. Cortland's eyes were brown, but as hard as agate as she surveyed the resplendent Wildcat Gordon through her lorgnette. She had the air of putting him in the place of any man who exhibited such extremely bad taste.

"I have often wished to meet the famous Commissioner Gordon," she murmured scornfully. "For once, the newspapers have not exaggerated."

Wildcat's colorless eyes took in the dignified figure from buckled shoes to the ivory lorgnette and the diamonds in the woman's thickly coiled hair. A grin crossed the commissioner's broad mouth.

"The newspapers have not exaggerated," he said quietly. "You do live up to your pictures, Mrs. Cortland."

A muttered oath came from Quick Trigger's lips. Wildcat shot him a look that silenced him.

Wildcat noted that Mrs. Moreland did not appear as apprehensive as a visit from the police might have been expected to produce. He said then, "I regret, Mrs. Moreland, I have some bad news for you."

It could be seen that the young Mrs. Moreland must have long been steeled against some bad news that might have been expected.

"It would be my husband, I suppose?" she said, with cold calmness. "What has happened?"

Mrs. Moreland's attitude was clearly that of a wife who no longer cared especially what the answer might be.

"It's your father-in-law, Mrs. Moreland," stated Wildcat. "He met with an accident. He is—"

Mrs. Moreland grew very white. Her lips, moved stiffly.

"Father? He is—you mean—"

It was plain the woman's affection for her father-in-law was much greater than that for her husband. Mrs. Cortland supported her to a chair. Wildcat told briefly of the accident, but did not mention all the details.

Mrs. Cortland suddenly glared at him through the elevated lorgnette.

"In a case of this kind, I think it would have been more considerate to have had Mayor Van Royston

impart the news," she stated. "He, at least, would show more tact and—"

"Mayor Van Royston does not happen to be running my police department, Mrs. Cortland!" snapped Wildcat. "I regret the necessity, but I must ask Mrs. Moreland if she is aware of where her husband might be at this time?"

"This certainly is no time for a policeman to be—" began Mrs. Cortland.

"Never mind, dear," said Mrs. Moreland wearily. "My husband might be at any of several places. I wouldn't know. Is that all, Commissioner Gordon?"

"Yes, for the present, and I'm sorry," stated Wildcat.

THE commissioner decided to defer any question regarding a woman who might possibly have been known to be with the murdered millionaire. He was walking out through the long reception hall with Quick Trigger. There was a touch on his arm.

Mrs. Cortland had followed toward the door. She was smiling now a little more warmly. She spoke quickly in a low tone.

"I apologize for my attitude, Commissioner Gordon," she said. "Of course, you could not know that the Morelands have separated, and that there will undoubtedly be a divorce. There are women involved, commissioner. It made your question most embarrassing."

"You wouldn't happen to know any woman especially involved, would you, Mrs. Cortland?"

"You are intimating there was something more to this than an accident, Commissioner Gordon?"

"Exactly, Mrs. Cortland. It was murder!"

The society woman gasped.

"Oh, then, I'm sorry I've said as much as I have," she stated. "No, there hasn't been any one woman, at least none that has ever been named."

Mrs. Cortland's voice had become quick and nervous from the shock of what she had been told. But she exhibited a cool, thinking mind.

"If I can discover anything that will help, Commissioner Gordon, I will let you know," she promised. "Mayor Van Royston is a very good friend of mine."

Wildcat knew that Mayor Van Royston numbered Mrs. Cortland among his society friends. In fact, Van Royston had been elected mayor with the support of a reform party that had largely been made up of a society element in the city. The mayor and Wildcat were far from agreeing upon the police methods required in a racket-ridden city.

As they came onto the walk leading to the gateway, old Quick Trigger swore.

"Now why do you suppose Mrs. Cortland changed her sour disposition so fast, Wildcat?" he questioned. "Damn, I believe that woman knows something, and that means she thinks she could put a finger on some other woman! They're all like that!"

Wildcat made no reply. His gripping fingers caught Quick Trigger's arm. He pulled him abruptly into the shrubbery bordering the wide walk. Lights from the house showed a slender figure walking hurriedly toward the Moreland residence. It was a young woman wearing a green raincoat. There were three silverlike pendants gleaming on a tight hat. A taxicab was pulling away from the entrance on the side street.

A BRIGHT bulb over the servants' side door revealed a piquant face and reddened lips below the tightly pulled hat. Quick Trigger always had the appearance of being nearsighted, of seeing poorly. But his eyes were remarkable. He was squinting, looking steadily at the girl just entering the servants' doorway.

"By gravy!" he burst out. "Wildcat, I know that dame! Sure as hell, it's Rosa Latoire! The last time they had Slicks Murphy up on a gambling rap, she was pulled in the same raid! I got it she was Slicks Murphy's girl!"

Wildcat made no reply. He was already whipping toward their coupé. Before the slower Quick Trigger could overtake him, Wildcat was working a swift transformation.

"Hellamighty, Wildcat!" grumbled Quick Trigger, reaching the car. "You ain't meaning to try anything here, with all them society dames—"

"Drive the car around the first corner, Quick Trigger!" came the eerie whisper from the transforming dental plate. "Wait for me there! I intend to visit this Rosa Latoire!"

Half a minute later, The Whisperer was concealed near a tree close to the Moreland residence. He was watching the windows of a low, rambling ell of the house. This was undoubtedly the servants' quarters. Several of these windows on the second floor were in darkness.

But as The Whisperer watched, a lighted square flashed on. A woman's shadow was silhouetted briefly against the window.

The Whisperer swung into the tree and crawled along a limb that overhung a porch roof. He moved stealthily, and crouched under the window in which the light had appeared.

CHAPTER III
MURDER FRAME-UP

FREEZING rain pelted The Whisperer's crouching figure. He had become a part of the gray night. Prepared for fast action, when he made sure the young woman in the room was Rosa Latoire, named by old Quick Trigger, he was temporarily balked

and forced to play a waiting game.

The girl's black hair was now topped by a little white cap. She had doffed the green raincoat, and under it appeared the trim uniform of a lady's maid. She had deftly removed all marks of having been in the driving rain.

None would ever have suspected that the neat, pretty girl had within the past hour been present at, if not a party to, a ghastly murder. Rosa Latoire picked up some garments, spoke into a house phone and left the room.

The Whisperer employed a slender steel instrument. The window lock snapped with little noise as the frame was jimmied. He had the window up perhaps an inch when the door opened and Rosa Latoire returned.

The Whisperer froze close to the window opening. The girl closed the door and went quickly to a telephone on a corner table. She dialed a number. She spoke in a low tone, but the words came clearly through the slitted window.

"Let me speak with Slicks Murphy," she said. There was a brief wait. "Slicks?"

The girl's head turned, and she looked toward the room door. Perhaps she may have feared someone might be listening on an extension.

"Has young Mr. Moreland been there this evening, Slicks?" she asked. "Yes? Then this is an important message. We have heard that his father has been killed in an accident. This is Mrs. Moreland's maid calling."

The phone was replaced. The Whisperer's plan changed instantly. Rosa Latoire would keep for the present. The murdered father had known something about the Random Political Club. His dying words, then, had been backed by some news concerning his son.

The Whisperer glided from the porch roof to the tree. Five minutes later, he was in the coupé with Quick Trigger. The little car shot across the midtown section, headed for the bridge leading to West Borough.

CYRUS MORELAND, SR., had met with the murder accident shortly after nine o'clock in the evening. At about this same hour, business was good in what seemed to be an old-fashioned residence topping a hill above West River. Though there was no sign outside to indicate it, this was the Random Political Club.

In what had been the large living room of the residence, roulette wheels, dice games and other means of separating visiting suckers from their money were ranged methodically along the walls.

There was a method in this arrangement of the games that left the middle floor of the long room clear.

Little tables sat in the center of the room. At one of the wheels, a drunken young man with pouches of dissipation under his eyes was the target of several watching men. Evidently the young man had been playing for high stakes. But luck had turned against him.

Luck eventually turned against all who bucked the pleasant wheels of fortune operated by Slicks Murphy. The young man leaned heavily upon the table, and swore loudly.

"You're takin' my check for another stack!" he said thickly, "It's damn crooked, but—"

The man behind the table smiled unpleasantly.

"You'll have to talk to Slicks about that, Mr. Moreland," he said.

Vicious epithets burst from young Mr. Moreland's tongue. The man behind the table continued to smile and said, "Tell it to Slicks."

"Please, Cy, don't argue now," said a woman's voice that would have been musical had it been less harsh. "Please, sweetheart."

The woman's eyes were a brilliant green. They contrasted oddly with her pursed, red-painted lips. Young Moreland pushed the girl's hand from his arm.

"Lemme alone, Marge!" he said angrily. "I know what I'm doin'!"

The girl called Marge suddenly raised on her toes and whispered into Moreland's ear. Drunk as he seemed to be, the man's pouched eyes swung to the big clock at the end of the room. Whatever the girl called Marge had said, Moreland nodded and turned.

Four men, whose eyes had been upon him, moved away, but did not take their gaze from him. A man with a double-chin, a bulging stomach and an expansive white vest confronted Moreland. His smile almost concealed his beady eyes.

This man was Slicks Murphy. In a city where nearly all open gambling clubs had been rooted out, he still conducted his Random Political Club. The club that had long been a sore spot with Commissioner Wildcat Gordon.

"Maybe we'd better talk things over, Mr. Moreland," said Slicks Murphy pleasantly. "It's early, only a little after nine, and the night is young. Come into the office."

The four men who had been watching Moreland glanced at the clock. The words of Slicks Murphy turned other eyes toward the time, an unconscious habit when the hour is mentioned. The girl called Marge clung to Moreland's arm.

Slicks Murphy led the way up a short flight of stairs to a door at the top marked "Private." The four watchers seemed to understand they were to come along. Slicks Murphy deposited himself behind his polished desk.

The Whisperer had the window up perhaps an inch when the door opened and Rosa Latoire returned.

"I'll take your note for one more thousand, Moreland," said Slicks Murphy. "But this is the last time. I hold your notes and checks now for thirty grand. Whether your luck turns or not, I'll expect you to settle the total amount before tomorrow night."

Young Moreland tucked a small roll of bank notes into a pocket. A drunken leer crossed his hard mouth.

"Let's quit kiddin'—"

Slicks Murphy interrupted quickly, "Have a drink, Moreland, and sit down a while. You can't handle the stuff, you know, and it might be well for you to stay out of circulation a few minutes."

Young Moreland gulped the glass of liquor he was handed. Slicks Murphy dropped one eyelid, looking at the girl Marge. The red-lipped young woman nodded, and her green eyes glittered.

"Everything's O.K., sweetie," she said to young

Moreland. "Now be a good boy and sit tight."

Young Moreland did not hear all this. His chin touched his vest and he was instantly asleep. Slicks Murphy continued to check on the time. Nearly half an hour passed. The phone buzzed, and Slicks talked for a minute.

Young Moreland awoke shortly before ten o'clock. His eyes were vacant until he had been given a stiff drink. Slicks Murphy was smiling at him across the desk. The girl Marge was rubbing a caressing hand across his forehead.

"We have had some news—some very bad news, Moreland," said Slicks Murphy. "I just got a telephone message that your father was killed in a car crash. It happened nearly an hour ago."

Young Moreland seemed instantly sobered. But it was not with the surprise of shock, of receiving unexpected news. "I've been right here all the time!" he croaked hoarsely. "Right here with Marge and the rest of you! Give me another shot, Marge! It was an accident, huh?"

"The police think it was an accident," said Slicks Murphy softly. "Of course, seeing the way it is, I can extend your credit a bit more. You'll have the old man's insurance, and three hundred grand's a lot of dough."

Young Moreland's face went into his hands for a moment. He lifted to his feet.

"This isn't any kiddin' now!" he gulped. "You're sure, Slicks, my witnesses will stick to me havin' been here all evening?

"What the hell?" growled Slicks Murphy. "Quit your croaking, Moreland! You go soft, and you know what that means! Look after him, Marge!"

Young Moreland was slowly slumping to the floor. Marge parted her red lips in a smile at Slicks Murphy. There had been some real knockout drops in Moreland's last drink.

"You'll play along until the payoff, Marge," said Slicks. "We'll look after him until he gets some of the hooch out of his head."

Young Moreland's deep, heavy breathing gave assurance he would be out for some time.

SHORTLY before eleven o'clock, Wildcat Gordon braked his coupé to a stop in the block. north of the hill on which set the Random Political Club. Detective Sergeant Thorsen strode from a squad car parked under nearby trees. He was in haste to reach the commissioner's car.

"Had a little bad luck, chief," said Sergeant Thorsen quickly. "The mayor got wise and—"

"Don't pretend!" snapped the thin voice of Mayor Van Royston. "You're not glad to see me! It's a good thing I learned of this crazy move, Commissioner Gordon! What's the idea in framing a raid on the Random Club without consulting me?"

Mayor Van Royston stood very erect with his head thrown back. This pouted his chest and covered the retreating weakness of his chin. Elected on the reform ticket, Mayor Van Royston fitted in perfectly as a society mayor. He meant well enough, and he earnestly desired to have the city kept clean, but the ways of his police commissioner were too strong for his aristocratic stomach.

Mayor Van Royston stood very erect as an excellent figurehead for the reform city government. But a wise reform committee had named Wildcat Gordon commissioner of police over the mayor's head. Wildcat's reputation as an army officer, then as a police inspector, had made him the ideal choice.

From his appointment until this moment, Wildcat Gordon commanded his own police department. This kept the water plenty hot, and Mayor Van Royston was constantly burned up over his lack of control of the department.

"I have my own urgent reason for paying a little visit to the Random Club," said Wildcat cheerfully. "I'm still head of the department, mayor, and there was no special reason to tangle you with details."

"Tangle me with details?" snapped Mayor Van Royston. "I haven't objected when real gambling outfits were raided. But the Random Club is a gentlemen's association and patronized by the best citizens!"

Wildcat blew some smoke from a short, stubby pipe.

"Meaning Big Charley Vuldoon has the sign up for the gentlemen suckers who take their trimmings at the Random Club, mayor? It doesn't quite go down this time! I know Vuldoon swings a lot of votes, but I'm not coming up for election!"

Mayor Van Royston let out a rare oath.

"Dammit, Gordon! Vuldoon has no interest in the club! It is owned and managed by Mr. Murphy, and that has been proved! It is not a public organization, but a private social club!"

"Operating under the protection of Big Charley!" rapped out Wildcat. "Come on, Sergeant Thorsen, get the boys moving! I'll take the front end! Follow instructions! Sorry, Mayor Van Royston! I'd like to meet Vuldoon himself!"

Wildcat's coupé shot away in second gear, headed for the roadway leading up the hill.

The wooden expression on Sergeant Thorsen's face never changed. He had stood at alert attention during the exchange between Wildcat and the mayor. Now he pivoted and strode toward his squad car.

"Sergeant Thorsen!" piped the mayor's angry voice. "You will keep out of this mess! Gordon is walking into trouble and I command you—"

Sergeant Thorsen might have had wax in his ears. He was beside the squad-car driver and the

motor roared. Another concealed car came into view loaded with coppers. The roadway here was gravel, unpaved. The police autos spewed dust from their rear wheels and left Mayor Van Royston raging in a swirling, choking cloud.

The mayor turned and ran toward his limousine.

"Vuldoon must know I tried to stop it!" he was gulping through the dust.

His immediate purpose seemed to be to justify his own position with the political boss of West Borough. The Mayor had spoken the truth. No tangible interest in the Random Political Club had ever been traced to Big Charley Vuldoon. Vuldoon maintained his own business, on the surface a private practice of the law. It fitted in with his political power.

ON the hill in front of the great, gloomy residence which showed only one dim light at its front entrance, Wildcat Gordon braked the coupé in a whirlwind of gravel. Old Quick Trigger hopped out beside him. There was a wide veranda that had been built fifty years before. Across this was a big, massive door.

Wildcat's ground-gripping soles made no sound as they hit the porch. Quick Trigger's heels were harder and they clumped. A foot-wide square of light opened suddenly in the middle of the door. Wildcat shoved Quick Trigger to one side. Then Wildcat dropped into a crouch, his head below the lookout's hole.

A scarred ugly face with a twisted nose filled the aperture. A guttural voice demanded, "Who's out there? Show yourself!"

An outside light bulb flashed into Wildcat's square face and showed his cocked army hat. The lookout's mouth opened for a squawk, but it was never uttered. A hand with fingers like gripping steel claws shot through the square of the peephole. Wildcat's thumb hooked inside the flesh of a flabby cheek, and his four fingers dug through the outside skin.

"You'll unbolt the door before I bump out your brains!" rapped Wildcat. "Come here!"

The lookout's head jammed into the square hole with stunning effect. His twisted nose took the stiffest part of the impact.

"Unbolt it, mug!" grated Wildcat, giving the lookout's head another terrific rap.

"G'r'rup!" was all the guard could grunt through a mouth that was being inexorably vised out of shape by Wildcat's steel fingers.

An inside bolt slid back. Wildcat released his grip and smashed his other fist into the lookout's abused face. The man's body plopped backward. But as Wildcat's hand pushed the door open, an alarm gong rang back at the end of the long hallway beyond which was another closed door.

Wildcat removed the fallen lookout's foot from the emergency alarm in the floor with a hard kick. He lunged toward the inside door with old Quick Trigger crowding his shoulder. Quick Trigger held an old-fashioned police revolver. Wildcat caught his wrist.

"Put up the gat, Quick Trigger! We're going easy, and no gunplay!"

The inside door snapped open. Half a dozen inside men rushed into the narrow hallway. Then Wildcat started his "going easy." The inside men had not expected the outside door to be opened. But the first pair had blackjacks in their hands.

One sapper glanced off Wildcat's forehead. But the man swinging it already had his jaw knocked to one side by the upward swing of Wildcat's fist. Quick Trigger's bony knuckles flailed with accurate precision. Two other men went down.

CHAPTER IV
WILDCAT AND THE BOSS

IN the narrow hallway two men were as good as a dozen. Wildcat and Quick Trigger were better than that. The Random Club strong-arms were accustomed to the advantage of rods and blackjacks. They had none of the stand-up-and-take-it tactics of the army.

Wildcat's fists and his feet piled four men under him. Quick Trigger went to the floor under the smash of a sapper, but got to his knees and caught the wielder with a blow in the stomach that laid him out.

Then the inside door opened wider. A smooth, oily voice commanded:

"Let up on that, you fools! It's the police commissioner! There's been a big mistake! It's a little visit, and I knew he was coming!"

A tall man with a bony, angular face stood in the doorway. A few strands of greasy, black hair were plastered across an expansive bald dome. His eyes bulged a little, but the man was well kept and not bad looking.

Wildcat was standing on widely braced feet. Knuckles of both hands were bleeding. Guards groaned on the floor around his knees. The fighting commissioner's tone was coldly calm.

"Sure, Vuldoon. You've known about my little visit in the past two minutes since Mayor Van Royston called you. Nice, friendly boys here in your club."

There was a blue bruise over one of Wildcat's colorless eyes. But a grin widened his mouth pleasantly.

"It isn't my club, you know, Commissioner Gordon," said Big Charley Vuldoon easily, rubbing fingertips over his strands of greasy hair. "I'm a

visitor myself, but I know Slicks Murphy will regret a mistake like this. Sorry the mayor did not call me sooner."

"You're damned well right Slicks Murphy will regret the mistake," stated Wildcat, walking into the long room of the Random Club. "Nice place he has here. Sociable as hell, huh?"

"Slicks has been running his club long enough to know how to keep it sociable," smiled Vuldoon, still fiddling with his hair and keeping his tall figure directly in front of Wildcat. "It's a place for gentlemen. The boys made a mistake, thinking perhaps it was a visit from some of a rough mob that's been trying to put the bee on Murphy. I was going to see you about it tomorrow. That sort of thing should be cleaned up."

The political boss of West Borough was a cool number. A dozen years of undisputed control of the district had given him a conceited confidence. Other police heads had crossed him in West Borough. They had ceased to be commissioners before the days of Wildcat Gordon.

Old Quick Trigger was shaking his head, as if he were dizzy. This was not altogether from the blow he had taken.

"You might've known, Wildcat, it would be like this," he muttered.

Quick Trigger's disgusted words and gesture indicated the long room. Nearly a hundred persons were seated at small tables. Some were quietly drinking mild beer. Others were thumbing cards in games that seemed no more interesting than pinochle or bridge.

Along the walls where the roulette wheels and the dice games had been were only smooth panels. Except in one spot. Wildcat was close to the smiling Vuldoon.

"You'll join me at my table, a little drink, Commissioner—"

Vuldoon's smile held a faint sneer. Wildcat's right arm swept the tall boss suddenly to one side, almost upsetting him. One of the disappearing roulette outfits had failed to vanish as it should. The mechanism that would have swung into a wall had stuck.

Scattered piles of chips, the wheel and a man working to get it from view were revealed. A banker was sweeping packages of bank notes into a drawer back of a small grille work.

VULDOON'S smile was erased. His big mouth tightened.

"Don't make any mistakes, Gordon," he exploded. "This is a quiet club, and you'll—"

"I bury my mistakes, Vuldoon!" snapped Wildcat. "Tell your boys to sit down, if they want to stay healthy!"

Two hard-eyed but well-dressed men were swiftly crossing the room as they saw Wildcat sweep Vuldoon to one side. They had their hands in their coat pockets. Wildcat's eyes cornered on the door at the top of short stairs where the sign was "Private."

That door had opened and shut. The fat face of Slicks Murphy had appeared briefly, then vanished. Wildcat's abrupt action and his words were bringing others to their feet at the tables. There were nearly as many women as men in the room.

Vuldoon swung his bald head toward his two men. He said, "It will be all right. I'll handle this personally. Now, Gordon, we'll—"

Somewhere in the back the glass of windows crashed under smashing blows. Vuldoon would never know whether it was Wildcat or Quick Trigger who crunched a stiff uppercut under his angular jaw. For all lights went out before the fist started its short journey.

The voice of Wildcat filled the room with a roaring command.

"Keep your places, everybody! Don't move! This isn't on the program!"

A red blaze whipped out in the darkness. Wildcat heard Quick Trigger grunt and spring forward. The impact of metal on bone was so quick that Wildcat knew Quick Trigger had clubbed his revolver.

Someone yelled, "Find the switch! Put on the lights!"

If the switch was found, the lights did not go on. A feed wire had been ripped loose on the outside. Up in the private office of Slicks Murphy, a copper's gun blasted open a locked door at the back.

Sergeant Thorsen was in command there with four of his men. Through a window, he had seen a young man asleep on a couch. A red-lipped woman with green eyes had been standing as if to protect him.

Four other men were in Slicks Murphy's office. They were handicapped by the lights going out before the door was blasted open. Sergeant Thorsen's dicks had picked their men. Police guns jammed into soft stomachs before other rods could get into action.

Sergeant Thorsen himself was swinging the sleeping young man from the couch. The red-lipped woman screamed and nails clawed across Sergeant Thorsen's face. The sergeant freed one hand just long enough to clip the woman's screaming mouth. She dropped quietly and lay on the floor.

Slicks Murphy was bellowing, "This is a damned outrage! You can't pull this kind of stuff—"

This was Murphy's mistake. He should have oozed quietly out instead of establishing his location. There was a blow, then metal went, *Clink! Clink!*

"You can't take me—you'll be broken for this—damn you, take 'em off—"

Another blow and Slicks Murphy no longer squawked about the handcuffs on his wrists. Perhaps Slicks Murphy had been hoping for a rush of his other strong-arms from the gambling room when the windows crashed. His hope was futile, for every man in the long gaming room had been suddenly frozen.

EERILY rising above all the bedlam of crashing tables and shouting voices, a weird whisper filled the long room. It seemed to come from one of the smashed-in windows.

"Stay where you are, if you want to live! This is a holdup!"

In almost the same breath, the hard voice of Wildcat Gordon exploded.

"The Whisperer! Get him, boys!"

Again came that space-filling whisper of command.

"Stand still, Wildcat Gordon! Your little raid makes it easy! The first one to move will die!"

Other subdued, fear-filled voices were repeating, "The Whisperer!"

Coins jangled to the floor near the banker's grilled cage. The man there cried out. There was a distinct thud as his cry ended and his body plopped to the floor.

At this instant, old Quick Trigger was gripping the throat of one of Vuldoon's bodyguards. This man, held helplessly, must have believed Wildcat Gordon was throttling him.

For Wildcat Gordon's edged voice was coming from old Quick Trigger's tongue. It was he who had given the warning of The Whisperer. Weeks had been required for old Quick Trigger to perfect that imitation, but it was working without a flaw.

Now old Quick Trigger shook the man he held with one hand. Again the voice of Wildcat Gordon.

"Drop, everybody! I see him! The Whisperer!"

Quick Trigger's revolver exploded with a thunder of sound in the closed room. Bullets whined from the wall near the banker's cage. None in the darkness could know the slugs were well above any possibility of hitting the mysterious Whisperer.

Wildcat was using the dental plate. Nothing more was required in the darkness. His chilling tone filled the room again and there came a blue blaze accompanied by a hissing sound. Many in that room knew of The Whisperer's exploits, of his use of a silenced weapon that was less loud than his own weird whispering.

Now glass tinkled, back by a broken window.

"He's getting out! Grab him outside, boys!"

This was Wildcat himself talking now. The dental plate was back in one pocket. Bank notes from the banker's cage were stuffed into his clothes. Later, the widow or the children of some heroic copper would receive that money.

Two broad-beamed flashlights snapped on. One was held by Wildcat Gordon, who now stood over the recumbent body of Big Charley Vuldoon with a smoking police automatic in one hand.

One of Sergeant Thorsen's dicks held the other hand torch. It sliced over the scene, showing old Quick Trigger and Wildcat in their original positions. Only an unconscious man with a purpled throat lay on the floor at Quick Trigger's feet.

BIG CHARLEY VULDOON had been conscious. He had missed nothing. But with bullets singing, the boss of the borough had judged the floor to be the safest place. Half of the thronging crowd lay on the floor. With the coming on of the lights in the detectives' hands, a bedlam of voices and movement arose.

Wildcat Gordon pulled Vuldoon to his feet. He said calmly, "Well, you have a nice, sociable club. Perhaps you'll tell me Slicks Murphy had The Whisperer get the dough out of the place. It wasn't on the cards."

Coppers with swinging axes were smashing into the wall panels where the game setups had disappeared. Working with flashlights, they were methodically wrecking the Random Political Club.

Vuldoon pulled his own voice to deadly calmness.

"I suppose, Gordon, you know you're through? This is your first and last visit to Slicks Murphy's club."

"Right!" rapped out Wildcat. "Anyway, it's my last visit! Everybody out of this room! You're free to go! Smoke it up, boys!"

A rug and draperies at the rear of the room suddenly flamed with puffing, mushy explosiveness. They had been saturated with gasoline. Men and women jammed into the front hallway in a rushing panic.

The blaze whipped across the door of Slicks Murphy's office.

"Arson, Gordon!" rapped Vuldoon. "And Murphy and a woman are trapped in there! That will be murder!"

Vuldoon was pushing out with the others. A row of grim-faced headquarters men were covering the strong-arms in the place with deadly, short guns. But there was no more shooting. A stream of humans poured from the burning Random Club.

"Don't worry, Vuldoon!" said Wildcat. "Slicks Murphy won't die in there! But maybe he'll wish he had!"

CHAPTER V
MURDER DOUBLE CROSS

FLAMES from the old residence that had housed the Random Political Club painted a red

glare against the rainy sky of West Borough. None had been left to die. Wildcat Gordon's plan had been too thorough for that. Though only two handcuffed prisoners shot across West River bridge in a police car, all other persons were safely out of the building.

Old Quick Trigger stood beside Wildcat as the blaze reddened and effectually removed the nice sociable club for gentlemen suckers. The former police deputy rubbed one hand nervously over his bald head.

"I reckon we ain't doin' so good, Wildcat," he said dubiously. "I'm not so sure you can get away with the burnin' of the place. It puts you in one helluva spot."

Wildcat had not known the time since becoming commissioner that he hadn't been "in one helluva spot." He grinned now, broadly, and his colorless eyes glinted under his army hat.

"Vuldoon said other commissioners had raided the Random Club," he said quietly. "I'm the only one who won't be put to the trouble of raiding it again. I've an idea that Vuldoon himself may not know all that is behind tonight's play. We'll find that out."

A minute later Wildcat's coupé was drifting down the hill. He could imagine that about this time Big Charley Vuldoon would be on a telephone talking with Mayor Van Royston. If it had not been for one or two big cards up his own sleeve, Wildcat might have been worried. Again, he might not.

But Wildcat would have had reason for some fast thinking if he had been able to follow the red-lipped, green-eyed woman called Marge, who had been in Slicks Murphy's office. For the woman awoke on a dark lawn some distance from the still flaming Random Club. She sat up dazedly, rubbing her round chin.

Sergeant Thorsen had not pulled his punch in the least.

The green-eyed young woman's name was Marge Mowbray. As she came slowly to her feet, one hand darted into the bosom of her dress. Her fingers touched a small but efficient rod. Words slid venomously over her red lips.

"I'll get him for that, so help me!" she stated, with deadly intensity. "No mug has ever slapped me down and lived! And if they've got Cy Moreland, I'll maybe have to get him, too! That damned egg may squeal if he keeps fogged up on hooch!"

Then a hard smile crossed the woman's mouth, and she said, "I'll have to make a quick play where it will do the most good! Maybe I'll need an alibi myself!"

Blocks away, Marge Mowbray hailed a taxicab. She rode to the first drug store. In a telephone booth she gave a number. Wildcat Gordon would have been amazed to know it was police headquarters.

"Henry?" said the red-lipped woman, her voice drippingly soft. "I haven't seen you for three days, Henry. I've been to a movie and I can't sleep. I want to see you for a little while."

"Why—well, sure, Marge," said the voice at the other end. "I can make it in about half an hour. There's been some hell loose over in West Borough, but I'm keeping out of that. In half an hour."

Marge Mowbray's green eyes gleamed as she came from the telephone booth. In the taxicab she applied cosmetics to conceal the bruise on her chin. Her red lips wore a smile. In half an hour she would be in her rooms, far from West Borough and the burned Random Club.

"The big, soft mutt," she murmured. "He'll be over."

Now Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton looked like anything but a big, soft mutt. He was a long-nosed, small-mouthed man with a slanting forehead and closely set eyes. He had replied to Marge Mowbray's phone call from the office of Wildcat Gordon himself at headquarters.

His ugly face had a dreamy, faraway look as he replaced the phone.

Perhaps never before had tough Henry Bolton been a "soft mutt" for any woman. For years, Deputy Bolton had lived for one ambition: he wanted to be commissioner of police. And he had expected the appointment from Mayor Van Royston when Wildcat Gordon had been named over the mayor's head.

For months, Deputy Bolton had stubbornly opposed Wildcat's administration. Wildcat enjoyed it. Especially when The Whisperer had first appeared and had given Deputy Bolton the runaround.

To get The Whisperer, to become commissioner, these were the deputy's chief desires. None in the department would have believed that the self-centered Henry had fallen for a woman. But he now was giving his face a quick shave in the commissioner's washroom.

In half an hour he was to have a little visit with red-lipped Marge Mowbray.

In the meantime, Wildcat Gordon evaded headquarters. He did not have to be told that a raging Mayor Van Royston would be seeking him there, or at the penthouse where he resided with old Quick Trigger. He headed the coupé for the oldest section of the city.

"Maybe it's just as well we dodge trouble as long as we can," said Quick Trigger. "Going out to the seventy-ninth, Wildcat?"

"The seventy-ninth it is," said Wildcat grimly. "We may listen in while a prize pair of little birdies talk."

Old Quick Trigger grinned. He said, "So that's why you told Vuldoon that Slicks Murphy would wish he was dead."

AT this moment, Slicks Murphy was indeed getting the idea that dying might not be so bad. He was standing in the blackest darkness. His feet sucked in inches of muddy slime when he moved. The floor might have been the bottom of a filthy sewer.

Murphy's right wrist was attached to a cold, rusty iron bar. This was in the wall of a cell, an underground dungeon in which there was no light, no visible window. Rats scurried and squealed on the slimy floor.

Cold as it was in the dungeon cell, Slicks Murphy suddenly emitted an oath and started sweating. Sharp, pointed teeth had nipped into an exposed ankle.

The Random Club manager put his free arm over a swaying hammock, the only resting place in the small cell.

Though handcuffed to the iron bar, the prisoner was in position to lift himself from the floor.

But Slicks Murphy was heavy. One end of the hammock came loose. Then he was kicking at the gray, scurrying rats he could not see. He heard a voice in an adjoining cell utter a hollow groan.

"Moreland?" said Slicks. "Do you hear me?"

Another hollow groan was the only reply. Slicks had to keep his feet moving. Moisture oozed and dripped from the ceiling. It was like being buried alive. Since Sergeant Thorsen's men had thrust him into the cell, there had been no evidence of any one outside. The dungeon was like an isolated grave.

Slicks Murphy had no means of knowing where he had been taken. But he knew Cyrus Moreland, Jr., was in the adjoining cell.

The underground cells of the old seventy-ninth police precinct had long been abandoned. The small station, above ground on the riverfront, was boarded up. Only Wildcat Gordon, Sergeant Thorsen and a dozen picked men knew the use of the dungeon cells under the closed and dilapidated building.

Wildcat Gordon reserved these slimy dungeons for his own purposes. No lesser criminal ever would be put there. It was a place for killers with frozen tongues, for crooks who enjoyed too much political protection to be amenable to police questioning.

Wildcat had parked his coupé away from the abandoned station. He entered a small, grimy room of brick walls with old Quick Trigger. Both moved silently and without lights to a small table at the side of the room. They seated themselves, speaking in low tones.

In the rat-infested, slimy dungeon, Slicks Murphy pulled himself as close as he could to the adjoining cell.

"Moreland? You hear me?"

A groan, an oath. Then: "Where are we? That you, Slicks? What in hell's happened? They found out! They found out! I knew—"

"Shut up! Keep your head! The club was raided! It's some of Wildcat Gordon's rough stuff! Come at a bad time, that's all! Understand? We are in the clear, but we don't do any squawking when we get into court!"

"Into court? Damn you, Slicks! I'm sick! You hear?"

Young Moreland's feet were slapping in the slime. Rats squealed.

"Can the soft stuff, Moreland! Maybe you'll get the hooch out of your head before morning! They have to take us to court! Wildcat Gordon's only making it tough to see if we'll squeal, name the big boss! It's—"

"Slicks! Slicks!" Young Moreland was screaming. "You know where I was all evening! Marge knows! Anyway, there's the witnesses, and the time! I won't squeal, but whatever happens, you, have to stand by me, all of you !"

"If you don't shut up and begin taking it easy, I wouldn't depend on anything, Moreland! Maybe nobody saw you at the Random Club all evening, see?"

"What, Slicks? You couldn't! Murder! I could prove I was—"

"You can't prove a damned thing, Moreland, unless you play right through! These insurance dicks are smart as hell! You keep your face shut on any squawking! Scruter and Devine will fix up this raid stuff! We'll be in the clear, and then you lay off the hooch! When you get into court, you was out, see? You don't even know about the raid!"

IN the grimy brick room upstairs, Wildcat Gordon pulled earphones of a dictograph from his head.

"Come on, Quick Trigger," he said. "Judge Kyley is about to hold a special early morning session of court. Our two sweet little birdies will be out on bail."

"Sometimes I can't follow you, Wildcat," grumbled Quick Trigger. "You heard enough from that pair. There's Rosa Latoire and—"

"That's the end of the trail just now," interrupted Wildcat. "It is going to be given out by the coroner and the police that Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., came to his death by accident so far as can be determined. For the present, we are dealing only with an unusual gambling raid. Get it?"

"Maybe I'm getting old," sighed Quick Trigger. "You've got this pair to sweat, and Rosa Latoire."

A grim smile crossed Wildcat's face.

"We've got nothing on young Moreland, so he is going free without appearing in court," stated Wildcat

surprisingly. "Slicks Murphy will be admitted to bail by Judge Kyley. His mouthpieces, Scruter and Devine, will be in this somewhere. And there's Vuldoon. I'm not so sure he is in on the bigger game, then again he might be the brains behind it."

So it came about that a dazed, frightened, sick young man found himself suddenly free in the early morning. Removed from the old seventy-ninth precinct cells in the darkness and whipped away in Sergeant Thorsen's car before he was permitted to go, young Moreland could not have informed anyone where he had been held.

Then there was a slightly bewildered Slicks Murphy, who must have come into the courtroom of Judge Patrick Kyley expecting some more serious charge only to find himself facing an unexpectedly lenient court.

Judge Patrick Kyley was not a lenient judge by nature, not with crooks, or with the brand of lawlessness that Slicks Murphy represented. Moreover, the red-faced, easily angered Judge Kyley had only the greatest contempt for lawyers of the Scruter and Devine brand.

But this morning these mouthpieces were given a surprise. It led to a sudden confidence in themselves they never before had experienced in Judge Kyley's court.

For Wildcat Gordon had not appeared. Sergeant Thorsen was the lone prosecuting witness at this preliminary hearing. And Sergeant Thorsen appeared to dislike his position very much at this moment. It was a sunrise court, and when Sergeant Thorsen made his somewhat hesitating statement, the ratty, slick-haired Scruter and Devine smiled slyly at each other.

These two lawyers were among the worst of the underworld shysters. Their long association with political crookedness had made their black eyes sly. Both had ratty chins. They were as alike as brothers, though of different names.

Scruter was the voice of the firm. Sergeant Thorsen said the charge against Slicks Murphy was operating a gambling club contrary to law.

The sly-eyed Scruter was instantly on his feet.

"I would say, your honor, that charge is impossible of proof," he voiced triumphantly. "The evidence must at least be tangible. There is none, and I might suggest there was much more lawlessness in the action of the police that will bear investigation."

ARGUMENT of that sort might have been expected to bring an angry snort from Judge Patrick Kyley. But to the amazement of the lawyers, and of Slicks Murphy, the red-faced judge nodded, as if in reluctant agreement.

"Your contention is admitted, even against my will," stated Judge Kyley. "The police, Commissioner Gordon himself, seem to have overstepped the bounds of reasonable law. The method of arrest and the plain destruction of evidence compels me to grant an indefinite continuance in this case. The prisoner will be admitted to nominal bail, I will set one week from today as a tentative date for further hearing."

Sergeant Thorsen's wooden face never changed expression. Scruter and Devine displayed smirking smiles. A vast sigh of relief went up from the throat of Slicks Murphy, though he restrained it. Judge Kyley himself, going so far as to condemn the action of his friend, Wildcat Gordon?

The shysters might not have been so confident had they known that Wildcat Gordon had been in close conference with Judge Kyley for an hour before this hearing.

CHAPTER VI
MURDER BY PHONE

IT was one week after the admission to bail of Slicks Murphy in Judge Patrick Kyley's court. Newspaper headlines flared, died down, but flared again.

The coroner's office and the police had given out as a result of an inquest that no determining evidence of other than accident had been discovered in the death of Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr. Missing drivers of the taxicab and the truck were still being vainly sought.

The newspapers demanded more definite action by the police. Wildcat Gordon received a call late in the afternoon at his headquarters office where he had dropped in only once during the week.

"Mrs. Cortland speaking," said the society woman's now friendly voice. "So you found nothing, Commissioner Gordon, to prove your astonishing statement to me that Cyrus Moreland was murdered?"

"Sorry, but there was nothing to support it," admitted Wildcat.

"But, commissioner, I learn you are having troubles of your own," the society leader insisted. "Is it true that Charley Vuldoon is bringing charges of arson against you in connection with the Random Club raid?"

"That seems to be the way of it, Mrs. Cortland," said Wildcat cheerfully. "Possibly he can make it stick, too. We did burn out Slicks Murphy's club."

Mrs. Cortland's voice was suddenly hard and hostile.

"That Charley Vuldoon!" she said harshly. "I have learned, commissioner, that he even dominates your mayor! Mayor Van Royston was a friend of mine, but now I learn he is about to remove you from office!"

"I haven't been informed officially, but it probably is true, Mrs. Cortland," said Wildcat.

He was trying to understand Mrs. Cortland's sudden, amazing interest in his welfare. A charge of arson had been brought in a West Borough court. Mayor Van Royston had announced he contemplated the removal of Commissioner Gordon. There was no doubt but that the wrathful Vuldoon dominated the mayor.

Then Wildcat got an answer from Mrs. Cortland.

"You know I have been suing Charley Vuldoon for a deliberate steal of some of my West Borough property while I was visiting in England?"

"I didn't know," said Wildcat. "I take it you do not like Vuldoon?"

"Can anyone like a political pig?" said Mrs. Cortland. "I might tip you off, Commissioner Gordon, that Slicks Murphy has reopened the Random Political Club. I have it straight. And Vuldoon is behind it, I am sure. It is now located on an old yacht owned by Charley Vuldoon. And it is anchored in West River, just above the limits of the city. Is that any help?"

"Out of our jurisdiction, eh?" said Wildcat. "It is a tip worth having, though at the moment I don't see what can be done about it."

"Well, anyway," flared Mrs. Cortland, "I intend to see Mayor Van Royston tonight, and when I do, he will know what I think of Vuldoon!"

Wildcat had a sudden idea. He said, "Perhaps I'll encounter you at Mayor Van Royston's office tonight."

But his visit to Mayor Van Royston's office that evening was delayed two hours beyond the time he had expected to be there.

SHORTLY after darkness that evening, Mrs. Cyrus K. Moreland, Jr., let herself into her residence. Apparently she had been shopping. Her husband had not visited the home, though he had attended his father's funeral.

Mrs. Moreland gave some parcels to one of the servants. She moved wearily upstairs and into her boudoir. This was a luxurious room. But its costliness did not seem to appeal to the wife of young Moreland.

She had been, was still, a beautiful woman. But she touched new and hard-drawn lines around her mouth as she looked into the mirror. Her eves held the look of a haunted, defeated woman.

Her personal telephone on a stand was of white enamel, in keeping with the room. The instrument buzzed suddenly. Mrs. Moreland picked it up and replied. For seconds, there was no voice. Mrs. Moreland spoke again. A muffled tone of a woman said, "Sorry, I guess I have the wrong number."

Young Mrs. Moreland resumed the low seat before her dressing mirror. She attempted to touch out the lines around her mouth. Her lips had been made too red for the drawn, haggard face.

"What's the use of anything—anything?" murmured the wife who evidently regarded herself as worse than widowed.

She touched the tips of her fingers across her lips, scraping off some of the lipstick. Anyone seeing her then, would have thought she had been stricken with sudden paralysis. She attempted to rise, but fell in a limp heap before the dressing table.

The hand with which she had touched her lips had been used in picking up the telephone.

As Mrs. Moreland fell, all but a single low light in the room were switched off. The woman's body seemed to stiffen. Her hands moved only once, then fluttered and were still. With haunted eyes wide and staring, Mrs. Moreland was dead.

For half a minute, there was no movement. Then into the light came a pair of white hands—woman's hands. A tiny vial was uncorked, and one hand carefully touched the vial across the dead woman's mouth. There appeared an instantly corrosive burning of the lips.

The vial fell to the floor beside Mrs. Moreland's still hands. Steps crossed the room in the semidarkness. A cloth was rubbed carefully over the white-enameled telephone instrument. Then a door leading toward the rear of the residence opened and closed softly.

WILDCAT GORDON was in Quick Trigger's penthouse when Sergeant Thorsen called. A doll-like girl with the bluest of eyes and the blackest of curling hair answered the phone. She was "Tiny" Traeger, granddaughter of old Quick Trigger. Her mouth took on an angry pout.

"Headquarters and important, Wildcat," said Tiny Traeger. "You have not been home a single night for more than a week. So I thought tonight we would go to a movie and—"

"You're too young to think," grinned Wildcat. "Perhaps you think I should go see 'Crime Doesn't Pay,' or some good detective picture?"

Tiny flounced from the room. Old Quick Trigger said, "More trouble, Wildcat?"

Sergeant Thorsen's unemotional voice spoke only one sentence:

"Chief, Mrs. Cyrus Moreland, Jr., has committed suicide, and we just got the call."

But Sergeant Thorsen supplied a little more when questioned.

"Quick stuff, chief. Cyanide. A servant found her with the bottle beside her and her mouth burned. She died instantly."

Wildcat Gordon and Quick Trigger shot down in the elevator. Except for the penthouse, the building

was vacant. It was a waterfront loft building bought by Quick Trigger out of years of savings.

Wildcat's car roared into the street. He swung away from midtown traffic, headed for the exclusive suburb where Mrs. Moreland had resided.

"You're thinking about Rosa Latoire," said Quick Trigger. "Maybe we've been playing this wrong, Wildcat. Here a week has gone, and we haven't had a new lead. Do you suppose young Moreland might have—"

"Sergeant Thorsen said it was suicide, Quick Trigger. I am thinking of Rosa Latoire, and that Mrs. Moreland was not the type to bump herself off over a worthless husband. Cyanide's damned fast stuff. I think Rosa Latoire will have to be brought in now, even if it upsets the rest of the case."

Wildcat's car was on a four-lane traffic avenue for a few blocks. A red light stopped him. Another car squealed its brakes stopping. The two cars stood side by side.

"Hellamighty!" exploded Quick Trigger. "Look over there! You don't suppose Deputy Bolton beat us to the idea?"

The signal light changed. Deputy Henry Bolton was at the wheel of a police squad car. Beside him sat a very red-lipped woman, who snuggled close to the deputy's shoulder. But it was the vivid face under a tight hat with three silvery pendants that caused Wildcat to abruptly crowd the deputy's car toward the curb after the intersection was crossed.

Deputy Bolton ran up on the curb and stopped as the cars clashed. Wildcat rolled from his seat and ran around.

Deputy Bolton rasped, "Commissioner Gordon! And what's the idea of jamming me here on the avenue?"

Wildcat jerked open the rear door. He said, "I see you've picked up Rosa Latoire in the Mrs. Moreland death. I'll take her over into my own car. I'll do the questioning in this case while it's hot."

Deputy Bolton's small mouth screwed up. The green eyes of the woman beside him glowed, and she said, "So that's the crazy Wildcat Gordon, is it, Henry?"

"Crazy says it!" snarled Deputy Bolton. "What do you mean Mrs. Moreland's death, and insulting Miss Latoire? When did all this, happen, if it did?"

"Less than half an hour ago!" snapped Wildcat. "Miss Latoire is Mrs. Moreland's personal maid! So she is—"

"Miss Latoire has been with us for the past three hours," stated Deputy Bolton, with a scornful smile. "You're off on the wrong foot again."

"With you for three hours?"

"Yes, we took in an early show," said Deputy Bolton. "My friend here, Miss Latoire and—well, her young man."

Wildcat caught the hesitation. He demanded, "And who was this friend? Somebody's going to need plenty of alibi!"

Deputy Bolton grinned loftily. "It does happen to have been Cyrus Moreland, the husband of Mrs. Moreland," he stated. "He was with us until an hour ago, then he said he had some business to attend to. I'm seeing the girls home, and what the hell's wrong with that?"

The lovely, vivid face of Rosa Latoire was suddenly buried in her white, slim hands. She was sobbing.

"Poor Mrs. Moreland! Oh, what have I done? I must go to her! I'll go with Commissioner Gordon! Mr. Moreland wasn't there! I've heard her threaten to kill herself, but I didn't think she'd—"

Rosa Latoire got out of Deputy Bolton's car and walked over to Wildcat's coupé. Wildcat looked at the ripe, red lips of the woman beside Deputy Bolton. Her green eyes were defiant challenge.

"Take your girlfriend home, Henry, and may the gods be with you!" rapped out Wildcat. "She'll make a fine woman for a new acting commissioner!"

ROSA LATOIRE was squeezed into the seat between Quick Trigger and Wildcat as they speeded to the Moreland residence. It was when the weeping personal maid was preceding them into the suburban home that Quick Trigger drew Wildcat aside.

"That other woman with Henry Bolton," he said. "Hellamighty! She's one of the Slicks Murphy outfit, or my old eyes are tricking me."

"Thanks," said Wildcat shortly. "But that's no information. Either Henry is smarter than I think, or he is fairly on his way to get his hide scorched."

A minute later, Wildcat Gordon was watching the police medical examiner bending over the rigid body of pretty Mrs. Moreland.

"I'd say it's cyanide acid, all right," stated the gray-haired doctor. "It only required a touch of it, even if she intended to drink the damned stuff. Looks like a clear case of suicide."

Rosa Latoire was sitting in a chair, her brilliant, black eyes suffused with tears.

"I didn't know! Oh, I'm to blame!" she sobbed. "But I loved him, and I couldn't help it!"

Wildcat took it that the maid was taking responsibility for having stolen the affections of the dead woman's husband. Wildcat ordered one of his men to remove Rosa Latoire from the room. His keen, colorless eyes were taking in details. A hairbrush with a white-enameled back had fallen to the floor. A bit of the deadly acid had been spilled upon it.

The little vial had a rough surface. No fingerprints there. None to confirm or dispute the theory of suicide. Then Wildcat whistled softly to himself and strode across the room. Five seconds later, he

had acted so swiftly none of his men had seen his motions.

The enameled French phone was jerked from its cord and thrust inside his coat. There was a brownish patch where the enamel had recently been burned off. It was the same as the mark on the hairbrush.

A bit of something like flat glass glittered on the rug. Wildcat retrieved this swiftly and again he whistled softly, slipping it into a pocket. He pivoted.

"I agree with you, doctor," he stated. "From all that the servants say and the other evidence, it is suicide. No one will be held, except on notice for the inquest."

Wildcat said this, knowing without doubt this was murder. His quick summation of the circumstances went back to the activities of young Cyrus Moreland. The young husband had been under constant police surveillance. In a week, young Moreland had seemed to reform and tonight had been the first time he had been out with anyone who might be suspected.

Deputy Bolton, Rosa Latoire, this other woman, seemed to give a perfect alibi for the missing husband. Even though he had left the others after attending a show, and two detectives had lost his trail, it did not seem possible he could have been responsible for his wife's death.

But Wildcat reached a phone. He issued a quick order to pick up Cyrus K. Moreland, Jr. Old Quick Trigger was at his elbow.

"Glory be, Wildcat!" he exclaimed. "You're letting that black-eyed she devil of a maid remain free? You know—"

"I know more than you suspect, Quick Trigger. Publicly, this is suicide, understand? The trail has taken a direction it is difficult for even me to believe. We could lock up several persons, just as I might have had Slicks Murphy and young Moreland held a week ago, but that would not get the real brains behind this. And unless I am off badly, there will be more murders we have no means of preventing."

HALF an hour later, a hairbrush, an enameled phone instrument and a flat piece of glass were in the hands of one of Wildcat's trusted chemists. He had given an order for a special check on all three objects.

Then Wildcat gave Quick Trigger an unusual and trivial suggestion.

"You might drop down to the river place and feed Brian Boru," he said. "If it is two hours or two weeks, stay there and be handy to the telephone."

"I don't know, I don't know," complained Quick Trigger. "Wildcat, Mayor Van Royston will remove you when you come up for hearing on the arson charge in West Borough."

"He'll remove me before that or I am mistaken!" snapped Wildcat. "I may bring it on! You wait with Brian Boru, and feed that dog!"

A few minutes later, Wildcat was closeted with Judge Patrick Kyley at his city club. The commissioner informed Judge Kyley it might be wise to take a sudden change of attitude and rush the doubtful gambling charge against Slicks Murphy to hearing.

The red-faced Judge Kyley had a hard grin that matched Wildcat's own.

"I'd been hoping you'd get around to it before you are kicked out, Wildcat," he said. "Scruter and Devine will fight for a continuance."

"And that is exactly what I want them to do, Judge Kyley. I may want to make a personal visit to a gambling ship outside of my jurisdiction. Let's say you set the case for special night court tomorrow night."

CHAPTER VII
WILDCAT "KICKED OUT"

WILDCAT GORDON had told Quick Trigger there would be more murders that could not be prevented. Yet his secret understanding with Judge Patrick Kyley was the only step he had taken toward action against those who might be involved in the Moreland murders.

Wildcat had his definite reason for his seeming inaction, for the public proclaiming of the Moreland deaths as accident and suicide. He had become fully aware that all those persons thus far involved were no more than the active fingers of a bigger and more deadly hand.

Even before the raid on the Random Club and its burning, Wildcat had become convinced he might be touching only upon the fringe of a murder ring. Murder for extortion. Well organized, with "front men" whose arrest would mean nothing.

Though he was sure of all this, thus far he had not one conclusive bit of evidence other than the conversation between Slicks Murphy and young Moreland in the dungeon cells of the seventy-ninth precinct. That was not enough. It could not be produced in court.

And but for the chance finding of a flat piece of glass, an acid stain on a telephone, Wildcat himself realized he would have been far off a definite lead to the mastermind of the ring. Big Charley Vuldoon's quick effort to remove him as commissioner, prosecute him for arson in the club raid had been puzzling.

Vuldoon might be a conceited, confident political boss. But it seemed there must be activities con-

nected with his protection of the Random Club that even Vuldoon did not suspect. Otherwise, it appeared incredible that Vuldoon would thus be bringing on an open fight.

In any event, Wildcat Gordon left Judge Kyley and headed for Mayor Van Royston's office, firmly convinced he was to hear his dismissal as police commissioner. Well, he had been suspended before when the going got rough and the press started riding the police department. Mayor Van Royston might be a society executive, a party man, but he was all-fired reluctant to pass up any block of votes as big as that controlled by Big Charley Vuldoon in West Borough.

The newspapers knew only the surface action. Wildcat grinned over one black headline as he ascended the street steps to the building in which Mayor Van Royston had his office:

GORDON'S DISMISSAL IMMINENT

Wildcat grinned all the way up the elevator. He was still grinning as if he were asking for it, when he slapped open the door to the mayor's private den in the hall. And he was sure he had made no mistake as three pairs of eyes bore upon him.

MAYOR VAN ROYSTON was strutting pompously before his desk. He swelled up like a pouter pigeon as Wildcat entered.

Big Charley Vuldoon sprawled in an easychair. His bulging eyes took in the blue serge suit of Wildcat, his red necktie, his carnation and his army hat tilted over one eye. Vuldoon displayed a confident, smirking smile.

Mrs. J. Cortland sat stiffly upright beside Mayor Van Royston's desk. Her strongly modeled face was crimson with anger. She lifted her ivory-framed lorgnette and looked at Wildcat Gordon.

"I'm glad you've come, Commissioner Gordon," she said with chill dignity. "I have just discovered we have a weak-spined mayor who hasn't brains enough to know he is making a fool of himself. If you don't continue your campaign against this political rottenness, I am going to be disappointed in you."

Mayor Van Royston sputtered, but got out no immediate words. It was evident he was in a position roughly described as between hell and the deep blue sea.

"Well, well," chuckled Wildcat, sliding into a chair at the end of the mayor's desk and erecting his yellow-shod feet to a corner. "Quite a party! Quite a party! Let's have it, mayor!"

"I —I—"

Mayor Van Royston's weak chin bobbed. He glanced at Vuldoon, over at Mrs. Cortland. Vuldoon held a borough full of votes at his command. Mrs. Cortland was a recognized dictator in Lake Avenue society, where his honor so desired to continue on a pedestal befitting his position.

Big Charley Vuldoon continued to smile mockingly. His hand went to the black, thin hair plastered over his huge bald head.

"Understand, mayor, I have made no suggestion directly," he said smoothly. "All of us make mistakes."

Mrs. J. Cortland came to her feet. Her gaze flashed through the elevated lorgnette upon Big Charley Vuldoon as if she was about as close to dirt as she could possibly be. Biting words whipped from her lips for a full minute.

She had returned from England after a ten-year stay abroad. Vuldoon, she stated, had deliberately stolen much of her property on faked tax liens. Mayor Van Royston had the intelligence of a six-year-old if he permitted himself to be misled. If Wildcat Gordon did not go ahead and smash everything connected with Vuldoon, especially his gambling club, she would have no further respect for him and hoped he would be kicked out.

Vuldoon's eyes narrowed, and his smile rubbed off before the tirade ended.

"I have no interest in any gambling," he said coldly. "If you refer to Slicks Murphy, he is no longer in West Borough. I can't help it if he has been in Wildcat Gordon's hair. But now he's out of it and up West River beyond police jurisdiction. I shall go ahead with my prosecution of Gordon for lawlessness in my district."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Cortland. "Well, Mr. Vuldoon, from now on I am going to be in someone's hair, as you so crudely put it. Mayor Van Royston will hear from several women's clubs about all this, and we can swing a few votes ourselves."

Wildcat was stuffing tobacco into his stubby pipe. He blew a cloud of bad-smelling smoke toward the ceiling. Vuldoon reared to his feet.

"You're a damned, meddling hussy, Mrs. Cortland!" he shouted. "If all the truth were known about your sudden trip to England before your husband died—"

Wildcat's yellow shoes hit the floor. He was five feet five inches tall, and a head shorter than the West Borough boss. He jumped as his fist lashed out.

Vuldoon's big nose took the smashing rap and he staggered backward.

Mayor Van Royston squawked. Mrs. Cortland let out a laugh that wiped away her dignity.

"Why, you—"

Vuldoon swung a heavy fist, lurching forward as it went over Wildcat's head. Wildcat ducked and rammed his knuckles into Vuldoon's stomach. Then his hands twisted into the bigger man's collar.

He crashed him into the door, but used a foot to kick him to one side.

"You're suspended, Gordon! You're suspended!" yelled Mayor Van Royston. "I'll show you who is running this city!"

Wildcat pulled his army hat over one colorless eye.

"It takes three days for your suspension to take effect!" he snapped. "In the meantime, I'm the big boss in one place, the police department! And there may be plenty of hell within that three days! Thanks for the kind words, Mrs. Cortland!"

Wildcat's yellow shoes were pounding along the hallway before the raging Vuldoon climbed to his feet. Mrs. Cortland swept out after him in smiling triumph, but Wildcat had vanished. For a man who had just been "kicked out" of the commissioner's job, Wildcat was amazingly cheerful.

ALL the following day the city buzzed over new headlines. Wildcat Gordon was to be suspended. The reform party committee had been called together. In three days, the fighting man with the Texas eyes would no longer be commissioner.

Reporters sought interviews with Wildcat, but they could not find him. The simple reason was that the commissioner was having a long sleep on the third floor of an unsavory tenement. He did not awaken until within an hour of the time for Judge Kyley to call the hearing of Slicks Murphy.

Old Quick Trigger remained with him. Brian Boru was locked in a closet. The Scottish terrier, strangely enough, was a vicious animal, and it was the eerie voice of The Whisperer that controlled him. As Wildcat was leaving, he issued instructions.

"It may be sooner or later, but hell will break loose some time before tomorrow morning," he stated. "You will stand by. I expect this will be a very busy night."

Yet in Judge Kyley's court a little later, it appeared that Wildcat's judgment may have erred. Especially if he expected action to come through the calling of Slicks Murphy before the court.

Attorneys Scruter and Devine came before the bench. Slicks Murphy was not with them. Scruter said, "It is unfortunate, Judge Kyley, but the unexpected summons finds us with an important case in the Midtown night court. We must ask a further continuance, as we have been unable to have Mr. Murphy present."

Ordinarily that statement would have touched off an explosion. But Judge Kyley's blue eyes narrowed and he glanced at Wildcat Gordon seated in the back of the room. Wildcat nodded slightly, got up and walked out.

"Under the circumstances, on the grounds you have another important case, the postponement is granted," said Judge Kyley. "But this case must come up as soon as you are free. I shall be ready to conduct the hearing at any time."

The few spectators were amazed at the geniality of Judge Kyley. Scruter and Devine were playing one of the oldest of shyster games. It worked in racket hearings, in many cases of the underworld. Lawyers of their brand continued hearings whenever possible. For days, weeks, sometimes months.

In the meantime, important witnesses would disappear. Or they would be reached and conveniently forget. Plainly, Scruter and Devine were puzzled over Slicks Murphy having been called at this time, but they must have taken it that Wildcat Gordon was fishing to bring out something against Slicks Murphy before he was suspended as commissioner.

There was no doubt that Wildcat needed supporting reasons, perhaps a gambling club conviction, to lighten the charge of arson filed against him by Big Charley Vuldoon. Scruter and Devine departed from the court with their sly smiles working.

They imagined that Judge Kyley himself was willing enough to keep his court clear of the involved Random Club raid, of the seemingly bad odor attached to the sensational activities of the police commissioner.

And, as Scruter and Devine came confidently from the court, newspapers were already screaming the latest news. Deputy Henry Bolton had announced he was out to get the crook known as The Whisperer. And the deputy hinted that in the Random Club "outrage," as he termed it, a raid had apparently been planned to coincide with the holdup and stealing of the club's money before the fire.

WILDCAT read this as his car carried him swiftly toward a riverfront wharf. And Wildcat said, slowly to himself, "Now how far has that long-nosed, damned fool got himself involved with that green-eyed dame and the Slicks Murphy outfit? Or is he too dumb to know he is being played for a sucker?"

Which of the two might be the answer, the open criticisms of the press did not affect Wildcat's immediate action. It was still early in the evening. The commissioner's car was parked near one of the West River ferryboat docks. Perhaps ten minutes later a taxicab rolled onto the wharf roadway.

Wildcat smiled grimly. The shysters Scruter and Devine got out, and passed so close to his car he caught a fragment of their conversation.

"Once we've got Judge Kyley licked, it'll be a pushover—"

"Anyway, this puts Wildcat Gordon on the run—and the whole town thought he was smart—"

Wildcat was motionless. The shysters did not board a ferryboat. A launch swung alongside the wharf. A minute later it headed up West River.

"I thought that would be the night court," murmured Wildcat. "So my good friend Henry suspects some collusion with The Whisperer?"

Wildcat's coupé headed across town, but came back to the West River waterfront ten minutes away. A tall, gloomy building jutting toward the black water bore the sign, "Moreland Exporting Co." In that building, though he had been retired, the dead Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., had maintained a suite of offices.

Wildcat's car was parked a block from the building. It was the gray Whisperer himself moving along the lonely street. His stealthily gliding figure entered the lower floor of the Moreland building. The night watchman below may have thought he saw a gray blur against a window, but The Whisperer was already ascending stairs to the fourth floor.

He stayed close to the wall for more than a minute. Voices murmured behind the lighted glass of a fourth-floor door. The Whisperer slid forward. The occupied office was next to that which bore the name of Cyrus Moreland, Sr. The Whisperer worked with quick, sure hands.

A slender, curved steel opened the office door. The Whisperer went through another door to a rear office. The windows of this were high above the river. Between them stood a safe of an old-fashioned pattern.

The Whisperer wore gray gloves. His fingers turned the dial of the safe slowly, as he pressed one ear to the door. Minutes passed. He had to twirl the dial and begin over again.

The big iron door swung open. When The Whisperer turned, he was holding a small black box. More minutes and it was opened. A shaded light was flicked on over a desk. A paper was unfolded in The Whisperer's gloved hands.

HIS perusal of the document was brief. He refolded it, started to thrust it into a pocket.

"I was sure it would be that," he muttered. "So Mrs. Moreland was a joint beneficiary with her husband in the insurance policy of his father. That ties up one angle, but—"

The face of the policy was for the huge amount of three hundred thousand dollars. The Whisperer gave a ghostly, little chuckle as he reached to flick off the light he had used.

"Get them up! Drop that paper!"

The voice was thick, drunken. But the dull metal of the automatic pointed across the desk showed no evidence of a trembling hand. The face of Cyrus K. Moreland, Jr., with eyes glaring over pouches of dissipation, showed in the light.

The Whisperer knew that no movement he could make would be quick enough. He had ordered young Moreland to be picked up. But he must have eluded the police. The insurance policy fell to the desk. The Whisperer slowly lifted his hands.

His voice was weird, husky.

"I wouldn't use the gun, Moreland," he said calmly. "We are not alone up here."

Moreland's tone was low, deadly.

"Don't make me laugh, I'm too nervous!" he grated. "And what if I kill a man robbing my father's safe? Your voice, damn you. You're The Whisperer! It would put me in solid—"

CHAPTER VIII
EXTORTION PRESSURE

YOUNG Moreland pushed the automatic forward, and the safety clicked. A door had opened in the adjoining office. Two men were coming out, as The Whisperer tagged the sound of their heels.

The Whisperer's foot came up with a lightning kick. The shaded light crashed off the desk. A hand went for his silenced pistol. But it seemed young Moreland had anticipated just such a move.

The light desk jumped under a forward heave of Moreland's knees. The edge caught The Whisperer's legs and threw him off balance. Before he could turn, Moreland brought the automatic across his forehead with a blinding blow, as he leaped over the desk.

The Whisperer was momentarily stunned. The automatic jammed into his stomach.

"Back, damn you! No, maybe I don't want to stand in with the cops! But you've done me a favor! I couldn't get that safe open! On back!"

Shifting his feet, feeling the boring of the pistol into his ribs, The Whisperer straightened his arms high in the air.

"I'm going to kill you, you know!" rasped Moreland. "I don't get where you fit into this thing, but somehow, you know too damned much!"

Now was the time, and The Whisperer knew it. There was murder in the drunken voice. It became sure when young Moreland laughed suddenly on a wild key.

The Whisperer's body twisted. One fist started down with the speed of a striking snake. But Moreland rolled with the blow. He was big and heavy as he lurched forward. The Whisperer was trapped by a hard shoulder that struck him with the force of a football tackle.

He lashed out now with both fists, but glass was crackling under his weight. The light sash of the window beside the safe broke under the sudden pressure of the double pressure.

Moreland's automatic slashed fire across The Whisperer's face as he felt the supporting window burst from its frame. He had a glimpse of young

Moreland hanging halfway through the window. Then The Whisperer was turning over and over in mid-air, falling toward the river seventy feet below.

THE WHISPERER turned with eel-like litheness, hoping to land in the black water feet-first. He heard a raucous, drunken laugh ring out high above him. Then his body hit and went deep.

No more amazing thing had ever happened to him. The water of the river had not cushioned his hurtling body. Instead of striking out to bring himself to the surface, The Whisperer was clawing with both

The Whisperer's body was trapped by a hard shoulder that struck him with the force of a football tackle.

hands, digging himself out of soft, yielding sand.

As his feet came under him, he discovered he was unhurt. But the tall Moreland building had moved oddly past. Other buildings seemed to float by as he shook the sand from his eyes.

The Whisperer was on one of a string of barges. Ahead, a tug was pulling the string swiftly up the river. By this surprising chance, he had missed going into the water. He shivered slightly as he saw he had hit the sand less than six feet from the wooden edge of the barge.

There were no men on the last two barges. But The Whisperer swore under his breath as he realized he was already a block or two from the Moreland building. A plunge into the river, icily cold, was not on his program at this moment. Nor did he wish to be discovered by any of the tugboat crew.

So it was fifteen minutes later that The Whisperer glided ashore and into the darkness of a West River sand-and-gravel chute when the barges were being warped to the dock. The nearest public telephone was his immediate goal.

He was the little, gray D. Smith as he walked into a cigar store and the phone booth. The dental plate came from his mouth.

When the connection was made, he said, "Sergeant Thorsen, you will act immediately on the order I gave you earlier today. See that the police boats are well spread in West River below the city line. Place them opposite the incinerator and it will be about right. Slicks Murphy's Random Club gambling ship will be only a quarter of a mile above you."

"O.K., chief," came Sergeant Thorsen's wooden voice. "Deputy Bolton has issued orders for a squad report, but I heard him talking to a woman half an hour ago. He went out, and it seems he has forgotten to return."

"Disregard any and all orders from Bolton!" snapped Wildcat. "I'm running this department for another two days at least!"

"So far as I am concerned and those of our squad, you are running it as long as we remain on the force," stated Sergeant Thorsen, without emotion. "We'll be below the line, chief."

THE WHISPERER had no means of knowing of the sudden mishap which came upon young Cyrus K. Moreland within two minutes after the sand barge had carried him to safety. The young man dragged himself from the window of his dead father's office. His thick hands spread the insurance policy on a desk.

Moreland was gulping. The pouches under his eyes had seemed to grow larger. He took a long drink from a flask, and his broad shoulders were squared a little. But he was mumbling to himself.

"Now whatever happens, I've got the policy—"

"Sure, you've got it!" spoke a hard voice. "And I've got you, along with this other rat! If you're smart, Moreland, you will walk out of this building just ahead of me, and I will take the policy!"

Young Moreland heaved to his feet. The face he saw was more bulldog than human. A bulging chin, flat nose and pale eyes confronted him over a heavy caliber automatic.

"What—the—why, the damned, dirty double-crosser—"

"Shut up, Moreland!" rapped the bulldog mouth. "You haven't been crossed! I'm Knuckles Hamer, and maybe you've heard of me and maybe you haven't! I happen to be a private detective, and a damn sight smarter than the cops! That's why a few insurance companies have me on their rolls! Get it?"

Young Moreland's face was drained of color. His eyes took on a glazed fishy look. He was staring at the man just to one side of this "Knuckles" Hamer. He was none other than one of the four men who had been with him in Slicks Murphy's office at the Random Club.

"Mooch along, Moreland!" rapped Knuckles Hamer. "Your friend here happens to be under arrest! If either of you makes a wrong move, you get it! Like this, see? Now walk out!"

Hamer's gun was thrust into his side coat pocket, and he moved behind young Moreland.

"But it ain't what you think—"

"Cut it, Moreland! We'll maybe talk it over up at my office!"

When a car moved away from near the Moreland building, the alibi witness was driving. Moreland was beside him. Knuckles Hamer occupied the rear seat. Hamer directed that the car follow the West River waterfront up toward the city limits.

Thus it happened that the location of Knuckles Hamer's office gave The Whisperer an unexpected break, and brought about a slight alteration in what he had mapped out as a night of action.

AFTER issuing his mysterious command to Sergeant Thorsen, The Whisperer kept to the street along the West River. He had been carried by the sand barge well up toward the location of Slicks Murphy's gambling ship, anchored above the city limits.

He judged he could make quicker time afoot, and he had no desire, at this time, to risk summoning a taxicab or to delay reaching one of his own cars.

Due to its industrial setup, this section of the waterfront was little traveled at night. No cars were moving along the street as The Whisperer walked some three blocks. Then he heard a car coming toward him at a good speed.

As the car sped past, he was in the shadows at

the edge of a circle cast by a street lamp. There was only one other light nearby. It was that of a small filling station in the next block.

The Whisperer had no thought the car might have any connection with the night's business. Then he was suddenly on his toes, running toward the gas station. The street lamp had glowed momentarily across two faces in the car.

"Knuckles Hamer!" gritted The Whisperer through his odd dental plate. "And Moreland!"

He had not seen the face of the car's driver. That did not matter. Well enough he knew Knuckles Hamer for what he was. One of the city's most unscrupulous private detectives. Smart enough to keep out of the hands of the police, as well he might, in many suspected jobs of extortion and vice.

For it had been Wildcat Gordon who had kicked Knuckles Hamer off the regular force. Hamer had been doing very well indeed as a detective, until Wildcat had nailed him directly in a witness-bribery case. So after that, Knuckles Hamer had been free to practice on his own.

That was why Hamer was smart. He knew the police department inside out.

But Moreland with him?

There was nothing then to indicate that young Moreland was virtually being abducted. The appearance of Hamer added one more figure to the already tangled web of a murder racket. Could the crooked private dick be the mastermind behind all this?

The Whisperer, even as he darted swiftly toward the gas station, reflected that Hamer's name had been associated with that of Big Charley Vuldoon on several occasions. And The Whisperer knew the location of Knuckles Hamer's office.

For his own good reasons, Hamer had his own headquarters in a one-time roadhouse just outside the city limits.

The filling station man gaped as a little, gray man darted in, pushed a dollar into his hand, then shoved him outside and closed the door. He saw this unexpected visitor from the night seize the telephone and take something from his mouth.

The Whisperer was calling Quick Trigger.

"The old S-N roadhouse, Knuckles Hamer's dump!" snapped The Whisperer. "Bring the car! Park beyond the grove of poplars in the side road! I'll be there when you arrive!"

Another dollar opened the mouth of the filling-station man a little wider. The strange, gray visitor vanished, walking rapidly.

The Whisperer had nearly a mile to walk to reach the vicinity of Hamer's oddly located office. He had been keeping track of Hamer's activities for a long time, but the ex-dick had been smart enough that nothing had come of it.

AS The Whisperer was taking up the following ten minutes covering a mile, the gray-faced, pouchy-eyed Moreland was seated in a dingy office with barred windows. Across the desk the bulldog face of Knuckles Hamer was thrust toward him.

"I hear your wife died suddenly last night, Moreland," said Hamer, knuckles rubbing his chin. "So, as the insurance company lays it out to me, you stand to collect all the three hundred grand. Nice, huh?"

Moreland stared at the witness who had been with him at the Random Club the night of his father's death. He pulled out slow words.

"No matter what this dirty heel here has told you, I have plenty of proof I was in the Random Club when my father met with an accident," he said. "Maybe this mug thinks he has something, but there are other witnesses. You can't prove—"

"No?" sneered Hamer. "You tell him where he was when his father was killed, Jarky."

The witness called "Jarky" considered a minute, then he said, "Well, as I remember the date, this guy an' some of us was havin' a few drinks in the Tonio bar up the street a couple a blocks from where the accident happened. An' this guy Moreland left us sometime before an' comes in sometime after the killin'."

Young Moreland heaved to his feet, one fist swinging. But Hamer was quicker. His knobbed knuckles smashed into Moreland's mouth, knocking him back into his chair.

"Damn you! You can't get away with that! When I get the others—"

"Yes?" jeered Hamer, knuckles rapping down on the desk. "How about it, little lady?"

Moreland's eyes popped. A door opened and the red-lipped Marge Mowbray was standing there with a pitying look in her green eyes.

"Why don't you come clean, Cy?" she said sweetly. "You know you and me and three more mugs were in Tonio's bar, and you asked us not to mention you having been out of the place."

Moreland wiped the blood from his mouth. Perhaps an icy chill was pushing the alcohol out of his brain.

"You think you can do this to me?" he said. "Well, you can't! You know where I was and—"

"Come in, Miss Latoire!" rasped Hamer. "Moreland is hard to convince! He doesn't seem to know where he was that night!"

"Rosa?" gulped Moreland. "You? Why after we—"

"Why, Mr. Moreland, I don't understand," stated the vivid-faced Rosa Latoire, looking straight at him. "I didn't want to come here, but before I get into any trouble I'll tell the truth. You called me to bring your father to meet you near Tonio's bar and—"

Moreland cut her off with screamed profanity. He started to project himself across the desk. Hamer's knuckles swiped across his jaw and dumped him to the floor. Hamer pulled him up, punched him again and jammed him into the chair.

"Now perhaps you can see how it is, Moreland," he said softly. "I have here an insurance policy. It calls for three hundred grand. You are collecting that money, and you are settling with me. Don't forget, sweetheart, there ain't none of these people and some others wanting to be rapped for collusion in an accident murder. You will settle in full, or the insurance company gets all the facts as I have them."

Moreland dragged weakly at a flask on his hip. He stared at Marge Mowbray and Rosa Latoire as if he were hypnotized.

"Framed—you couldn't—"

Hamer slapped an official-looking letter on the desk. It was from the company named in the Cyrus K. Moreland, Sr., policy.

MORELAND staggered to his feet. He took a long drink. A paper was pushed over for him to sign. He affixed his name shakily. Then he said, "Slicks Murphy? I'm going to—"

"You're walking out of here alone!" rapped out Hamer. "You will be shadowed every minute until that money is paid over! Understand? Now take it out of here and let the night air cool you off while you're finding a taxi!"

Young Moreland stumbled almost blindly from the front door of the old roadhouse. For two blocks there was no other building. A cement walk followed the highway. Moreland staggered along this, nipping again at his bottle.

His thoughts were racing back. He had been in the Random Club when his father was killed. Or had he? The amazing thought struck him, and he stopped. His fogged brain recalled that he had passed out. The next thing he had known he had been in a filthy precinct jail cell with Slicks Murphy close to him.

What had Murphy said? That he would not be sure of his witnesses. Moreland's befuddled mind groped to a startling fact: he had been senseless, knocked out. Had he been at the Random Club all the time?

CHAPTER IX
MAN IN THE RIVER

LIKE any other victim of fogged moments, of knockout drops when his head should have been clear, young Moreland began to doubt what he believed he remembered as the truth.

Could it have been that he was in Tonio's bar? Had he been unconscious an hour, two hours or many more? Had the arrest of Slicks Murphy and himself in that gambling raid been a part of a setup?

Moreland weaved ahead He would see Slicks Murphy. But his head turned, and he saw that he was being followed. The figure was indistinct. No, he could not go to Murphy. He must sober up and get to thinking more clearly.

The deserted highway and the street inside the city limits showed no sign of transportation. Moreland stumbled at the crossing of a dark side road. A big poplar tree stood beside the walk.

Moreland had no opportunity to cry out. Iron fingers locked about his throat. Something thudded behind one ear and he started pitching onto his face. But he did not fall all the way.

Knocked out, his limp figure was suddenly lifted over a hard shoulder. He was carried into the dark side road.

"I'm dumping him in the rumble, Quick Trigger," said a whispering voice. "Tie him up plenty when you get to the hideout. We'll take up the little matter of Knuckles Hamer later. Wait for a call."

"I reckon, Wildcat, when it comes to Knuckles Hamer, I'm itchin' for one crack at that pushed-in face of his," said old Quick Trigger. "Dammit, where's this thing leadin' to—"

"Up the road without lights!" warned The Whisperer. "I don't believe Moreland was meant to get this far out of sight!"

Quick Trigger's little car slid away silently up the side road.

The Whisperer heard feet pounding along the cement walk. He turned and vanished in the poplar grove, going swiftly toward the shore of West River. Earlier in the day, he had gotten a row boat ready for use.

As he propelled the small boat into the black current of West River, The Whisperer was mentally reviewing all the circumstances and persons connected with the murders of the Morelands.

First came two women: Rosa Latoire and Marge Mowbray. The latter red-lipped, green-eyed friend of Deputy Bolton undoubtedly was in all this.

Next, there were Slicks Murphy and Cyrus K. Moreland, Jr. There was no doubt now but that some vast insurance swindle was connected with the murders. These two were directly in it.

Then Big Charley Vuldoon. What was the position of the big boss of West Borough? His open fight to remove Wildcat Gordon suggested that he might be unaware of the motive underlying the police raid on the Random Club. It seemed incredible the political boss would involve himself directly in killings, then bluff his way in a public attack upon Wildcat.

Then came Knuckles Hamer. This was the sort of racket that the crooked ex-detective of police might originate. Hamer had a cunning brain, knowledge of the police and the political setup. He

had beaten the rap in other extortion cases by the skin of his ugly teeth.

Could Hamer be the whip driving the others?

Scruter and Devine, the sly-eyed shysters. The Whisperer croaked a hoarse oath as he thought of the lawyers. Their game was to let their clients pull the rough stuff, while they juggled with the law and shared in the profits. But were they directly involved in this murder plot?

The Whisperer was sure this precious pair of legal technicians were now aboard the long, high-prowed white yacht lying in the middle mooring of West River. They had boarded a launch after they had said they had a case in Midtown night court. They would be with Slicks Murphy.

Mrs. J. Cortland had informed Wildcat that the yacht had been owned by Big Charley Vuldoon. No doubt, that would be true. Mrs. Cortland had voiced stinging contempt and hatred for the West Borough boss.

THE rowboat neared the middle of West River. Lights glowed along a row of round portholes. They marked the new Random Club, a real floating game ship. The yacht was moored to an anchorage buoy in midstream. The Whisperer estimated this was only a few hundred yards above the line marking the city limits. That was the end of city police jurisdiction.

The authorities of the county up here cared little about what went on beyond the river shoreline. Too many dock rats of the city frequented the upper river to make it healthy or profitable for the limited officers of the county to police the water.

The Whisperer pulled the rowboat well above the yacht, studying its position. He was thinking now of the only direct murder evidence he had obtained as Wildcat Gordon. A stained hairbrush, a tarnished phone instrument and a flat piece of glass. Well, when these were checked, it might be the course of investigation would take an altogether different trend.

The Whisperer could see no persons moving on the open decks of the yacht a hundred yards below his small boat now. Nipping weather would hold the gamblers and their sucker visitors in the cabin below decks, if no other reason prevailed.

One darkened launch was moored near the yacht's stern some distance from a gangway of stairs leading from the deck to the river. Lights showed a single lookout huddled in an overcoat, lounging at the top of this gangway. There seemed little necessity to be on guard against interference by the law.

Up here Wildcat Gordon had no jurisdiction. But The Whisperer recognized no such intangible lines of the law. The gray, deadly man whose pointed chin protruded oddly and whose hair was a whitish-gray under his round hat, knew no limits of jurisdiction. In his direct mind, justice could not be hampered by trivial technicalities.

The rowboat drifted on the black current. Through the ventilators came music, shouts, laughter. Business evidently was good tonight in the floating Random Club.

The Whisperer shoved an oar into the river and it floated away. A plug came out and water poured into the boat. The Whisperer started dipping it out with a bailing tin. As he did, he was thinking again of Big Charley Vuldoon.

For every move tonight was directed toward one object: he intended to force Big Charley Vuldoon into one open action before morning. Judge Kyley would be waiting and ready. And Slicks Murphy, with Scruter and Devine, were due to appear in his court in short and violent order if The Whisperer succeeded in his present daring move.

The Whisperer meant to know before dawn broke just how much connection Vuldoon might have had—if any—with the Moreland murders. And if Big Charley Vuldoon was being kept ignorance of the real underlying crime he was helping protect. The Whisperer himself intended to be the informer who would slap the boss right between the eyes with the murderous truth.

AS the rowboat drifted by the anchorage buoy, it was seen that the yacht was tied up to this floating red tank. The Whisperer marked that for future action, even as he was bailing furiously. His rowboat seemed to be sinking. It bumped the side of the Random Club yacht above the gangway.

The Whisperer apparently was trying desperately to keep the boat afloat. Fishing apparatus was showing at the boat's bow. The little, gray man let out a hoarse cry for help. The cry aroused the lookout who started up, saw the boat nearing the gangway and swore as he clumped down the wet steps.

The small boat was half sinking, The Whisperer clutched at the lower part of the gangway. The burly lookout reached the bottom step.

"Hey, you! Keep off! What the hell? Oh, in trouble, huh?"

This guard could see the blurred figure in the boat. Water was sloshing around him. The guard leaned forward, and an evil light must have come into his eyes.

"Well, we don't let anyone on board, see?"

It was evident the guard had the vicious intention of knocking the supposedly helpless fisherman back into his boat. His fist started down. And his fist kept right on going down. Steel fingers snapped around his wrist. He uttered a startled oath, but that was all.

The lookout was thrown over The Whisperer's

head in a sickening dive. His head rammed the side of the small boat. He rolled over and lay still with water in the skiff sloshing around him. A powerful shove sent the small boat away from the yacht, whirling down on the river current.

Lightless, spread across below the city line, police launches manned by Sergeant Thorsen's hardest dicks would be waiting. The Whisperer chuckled went up the gangway and whipped into a dry place near the superstructure.

His hands worked swiftly. Three minutes later, the swaggering form of Wildcat Gordon, with an army hat cocked over one eye, stood suddenly in the doorway of the long, gilded cabin of the Random Club gambling ship. He was wearing a loose, light overcoat that revealed all his gorgeous attire underneath.

The Texas eyes were the coldest menace. Wildcat was holding a heavy automatic in each hand. These weaved a little, covering more than fifty men and women clustered around game devices. Covered five men who were seated at a table with liquor before them.

Slicks Murphy, Scruter and Devine, and two other fellows were at the table. One of the latter pair had been imbibing too much. His head was down on the table. His hat was off, and The Whisperer instantly identified this man by yellow, rumpled hair, the pale side of a thin face.

He knew the man to be Reginald Devereaux, one of the city's young and wealthy rounds. The nephew of Janus Devereaux, an uncle who himself had a reputation as a big spender in night clubs.

But this identification was only a flicker in Wildcat's colorless eyes.

"Everybody hold your places!" he snapped. "This is a police raid! The yacht is surrounded!"

The sly-eyed lawyer Scruter sprang to his feet, shouting:

"Wildcat Gordon! Well, you're way out of line, Mr. Commissioner! And this time you won't get away with it! Not up here—"

The odd man of the five at the table dropped below the table's edge. A rod pumped blue smoke and slugs straight at Wildcat Gordon. But it pumped only twice. Wildcat jerked to one side. Flame and lead slapped out only once from his left hand.

The man with the rod screamed, reared up on his toes and went over in a spin. One hand was gripping a cracked shoulder. The bullet had plowed the tabletop close to Slicks Murphy.

"This'll put you in the chair!" squawked the sly-eyed Scruter. "You can't—"

"You, Scruter! Devine! Murphy! On your feet! You're going places, if my men have to take you feet-first! Everybody sit tight and you will be left alone!"

The foolish gunman was rolling on the floor, groaning. Scruter and Devine were not the type to face the rough stuff. Mouthing threats, protests, they nevertheless put up their hands and started walking.

"Get moving, Murphy!" rapped Wildcat. "I'm running this show! One rat more or less—including you—won't matter! Out this way!"

WILDCAT shifted his stocky body, clearing the stairs to the deck. His blue bright guns never seemed to waver. But their points might have been aimed directly at each person in the limited space of the cabin.

Murphy, Scruter and Devine marched sullenly to the stairs. Then Wildcat saw the face of Reginald Devereaux lifted from the table. The youthful rounder was staring with scared, wild eves at the commissioner.

"Everybody stay put!" commanded Wildcat, making a mental note he would finish this immediate job and return long enough to pull this young Devereaux out of the place. There was too much significance in his being with Slicks Murphy and the others, and off his feet from drinking.

On the deck, Wildcat shifted to one side. One minute later, three raging men had put on life preservers from outside. Slicks Murphy made one slight show of reaching for a pocket, but a slug nipped at his coat sleeve.

"The next one goes straight into your guts!" promised Wildcat.

The cabin door started to open and Wildcat nailed its jamb with two more slugs. No person came from the cabin.

"Over the rail! Jump! So you had a date in Midtown night court? Well, you've got another date now, and you're keeping it!"

"But you don't dare—"

Slicks Murphy's roar ended. One gun dropped into Wildcat's pocket. His freed fist collided with Murphy's double chin. He went over the rail on his back and splashed into the river.

"Into it, or you get the same dose!"

Scruter and Devine howled oaths, but they jumped. Wildcat spun around, gunpoint swinging at the sound of rushing feet. But he did not shoot.

"Wait! You damn, young fool!"

It was Reginald Devereaux. He was not waiting. Something greater than the risk of immediate death must have animated his leaping movement toward the yacht rail.

Wildcat saw his white, frightened face. Now he was sure there was something more than fear of a gambling raid that was driving the wealthy rounder. Young Devereaux had been pinched in many raids. They were old stuff to him.

Devereaux's light body splashed into the river.

No other person came from the cabin. Wildcat swore and went over the rail, shedding his light coat. He could not let the young fool drown himself.

He saw Devereaux swimming toward the shore. The young man had been jolted out of his stupor. But his head went under, came up, just as Wildcat gripped his light hair.

CHAPTER X
STRONG MURDER HANDS

WILDCAT GORDON went under the surface suddenly, pulling young Devereaux with him. Over them, the water was chewed and rippled by skipping slugs. A darkened launch swinging around the yacht had caught Wildcat's eyes in the nick of time.

But he was forced to come up after a short swim underwater. Young Devereaux was making no resistance. Too little, Wildcat realized. As they broke to the top an automatic was flaming from one side of the darkened launch.

The lights from the yacht's portholes spotted a face above the blazing gun. Then a searchlight from a police launch leaped out, and a siren wailed.

The red-lipped countenance of Marge Mowbray was illuminated. The green-eyed friend of Deputy Bolton was doing her murderous best to split the two heads bobbing on the dark water. Red blood streaked through the yellow hair of young Devereaux. Wildcat knew then why he had gone limp so suddenly.

Holding the youth, Wildcat attempted to use an automatic while the police spotlight held the woman. But a machine gun hammered the night. The police light blanked out, glass splintered, and the oncoming police launch veered to one side.

At this, the darkened launch bearing murderous Marge Mowbray changed its course. Extra power shot it away at greater speed than any police boat could attain. It was swallowed up, going away.

Two minutes later, Wildcat Gordon had young Devereaux in a police-launch cabin. Sergeant Thorsen and his men had pulled them aboard. Blood still oozed from Devereaux's skull, but he opened his eves.

Then young Devereaux spoke. His words were distinct, and his brain seemed to have been cleared by the impact of that bullet. Only Wildcat and Sergeant Thorsen heard his amazing words. They were a confession. A confession that came too late.

The police radio in the launch carried a headquarters announcement.

Janus Devereaux, the millionaire uncle of the white-faced youth on the launch bunk, had just been found dead. He had hurtled eleven floors down to the street in Lake Avenue. His body had crashed through a window of his apartment.

"No! No! I didn't know—they—I'll tell you! I only wanted the chance to—"

Reginald Devereaux screamed the words. In the ensuing minutes, he babbled of a robbery and admitted he had been hooked into it by notes and bad checks he had given at the Random Club. That robbery was meant, he said, to obtain possession of a rare treasure that he alone knew his uncle had received from abroad two days before.

None of those engaged with young Devereaux were aware of the character or real value of it. Then, suddenly, as full realization burst upon him, young Devereaux found some desperate thread of nerve.

"I didn't say anything—I didn't have anything to do with it! I haven't told you the truth! I won't name any—"

Young Devereaux's eyes closed and he passed into unconsciousness.

Wildcat said grimly, "He'll live, Sergeant Thorsen. But send him up to the country. He was killed by that bullet in the river, understand? Now for the others."

Sergeant Thorsen said Murphy, Scruter and Devine had been pulled aboard another launch. They could not have seen Devereaux being taken from the river.

"I'll meet the other boat personally down below," stated Wildcat. "I want word flashed immediately of young Devereaux's being killed, and that the police are dragging the river."

"I get you, chief," said Sergeant Thorsen, without batting an eye.

COINCIDENT with the time Wildcat Gordon was staging his one-man raid on the gambling yacht, a tall, spare man with thinning hair opened the door of an apartment. He had brilliant eyes, and he was a little drunk.

Janus Devereaux had long been known as a gay old blade. Among the night clubs, he had become hailed as "Diamond Dev." Devereaux had an inordinate passion for fine jewels, especially diamonds. He walked with a firm step into his apartment, on the eleventh floor of a Lake Avenue building.

A smiling, chattering Japanese servant was the only other person in the rooms. Devereaux had a long drink. Then he spoke genially:

"Koto, you may have the night off. I wish to be alone."

Diamond Dev closed one eye, and Koto chuckled. Then the Japanese scuttled quickly out. Evidently he was accustomed to "nights out."

After another drink, perhaps five minutes later, Diamond Dev picked up the telephone. The connection made, he said, "It's all right now. Come on up. I'll show you something that will take your breath away."

The old man then walked briskly to a drapery near the window. His hands were quick and he uncovered and opened a wall safe. He laid a thin, black box on a table under a light and closed the safe, covering it.

The windows of this room were of the French type, starting a few inches above the floor. As he waited, Diamond Dev walked over, pushed the draperies aside and stood looking into the lighter avenue eleven floors below.

Evidently he was trusting, for he left the door unlocked for his expected visitor. Diamond Dev was still by the window when the door opened softly. The old man turned, smiling.

That smile seemed to become frozen on the man's lips. He made a clucking sound in his throat.

"What—I never thought joking with a gun was funny!" he said. "Put it up and—"

A deep, husky voice commanded, "You will turn around and face the window again! Don't move!"

Diamond Dev turned slowly, but he protested, "You can't be serious? This is preposterous! Have you lost your senses? Come on now—lay off—"

"Look down into the street and keep your eyes that way!"

The voice was cold, icy with menace. Diamond Dev pulled his head around, looking down into the street. A furious oath and a name burst from his lips. That name was the last word he ever uttered.

The gun that had been held upon him came clouting down upon his thinly haired skull. Diamond Dev pitched forward, his face striking the window glass. He lay crumpled, with blood oozing slowly from his split scalp and the crushed bone under it. The weapon had been powered by murderous strength and motive.

There could have been no doubt but that Janus Devereaux died almost instantly.

The murder gun was slipped into the garments of the killer. Strong, white hands picked up the thin box that had been taken from the wall safe. Then the box was opened. A hoarse gasp came from the murderer and the box was closed.

All but one light went out. This gave dim illumination. Under it the strong, white hands reached up and pulled loose one end of the low window's draperies. Next, an arty-appearing chair with spindly legs was placed close beside the window.

One of the white hands vised onto a leg of the chair and it cracked loose. The chair then leaned directly toward the big glass of the French window. A cloth was rubbed over the chair leg where it had been gripped.

The hands lifted the long, limp figure of Diamond Dev. The man's spare body was raised by arms that had unusual strength. The corpse was sent crashing into the window glass and through it. The body turned over and over before it struck eleven floors below.

The thin, black box was gone now. So was the swiftly moving visitor. The murderer apparently had cased this killing and robbery with thought for the minutest detail. For the killer did not leave the building or the eleventh floor. Another door along the corridor admitted the lightly moving figure and then it closed.

SOME ten minutes later the police burst into Janus Devereaux's apartment. They were headed by Deputy Henry Bolton. The long-nosed deputy pushed around in the way of his homicide men. He saw the chair with the broken leg, one loosened drapery hanging above it. The chair leaned toward the smashed window.

Deputy Bolton saw a liquor taboret with bottles, and one glass that had been used. There was not the slightest evidence but that Diamond Dev had been alone.

"Drunk, sure as hell!" pronounced Deputy Bolton. "Ain't been any other person here! The manager said his Jap had the night off and went out! So he was alone! Clear case of accident, doc!"

The medical examiner had come up. His shrewd, old eyes took in all the details.

"Guess so," he grunted laconically. "Damned if we haven't been having some funny ones lately! But this looks open and shut."

The homicide men were forced to agree. Diamond Dev had been drinking. Perhaps he had pulled the window drapery loose, or had seen it and had attempted to fix it. The chair leg had broken. The man was possibly more than a little drunk.

There was not a single item in that room to dispute the theory.

SHORTLY after the case of Janus Devereaux was semiofficially closed by Deputy Henry Bolton and the story had been shot along to the newspapers, Judge Patrick Kyley was looking grimly down at three scowling, muttering men. Their clothes dripped water.

Slicks Murphy's face was puffed and swollen. Scruter and Devine, his mouthpieces, stood beside him. Scruter started to speak.

"Shut up!" rapped Judge Kyley. "I see you changed your mind about having another case in Midtown night court!"

The sly-eyed Scruter was foaming at the mouth. His little orbs glared at the judge. He was beyond due caution, and he was convinced that he now was within his rights.

"No damned court will make me shut up!" he blazed. "Wildcat Gordon can't get away with this! He shot a man down! He was outside—"

"Adjourned!" roared Judge Kyley, his red face becoming redder.

His gavel pounded sharply as he came flying over the bench. His stubby fingers were fastened in Scruter's collar, and his free hand slapped the gurgling Scruter soundly across the mouth.

"Now what did you say about my damned court?" he thundered. "You or your slick partner here, or Murphy himself! What did you say?"

Judge Kyley slapped Scruter again. The shyster shrank away, mumbling. "I—apologize, but Wildcat Gordon is—"

"To the devil with what you think of Commissioner Gordon!" exploded Judge Kyley. "You keep your place in my court, or I'll put you away for thirty days where even a writ won't get you out!"

He released the cringing Scruter and hopped back to his place. The gavel pounded.

"This court is again in session," Judge Kyley announced more calmly. "Now, Commissioner Gordon, you may tell your story."

Wildcat's own gorgeous raiment was water-soaked. But his necktie was still a flaming red. He grinned a little.

"Perhaps Slicks Murphy might like a chance to explain why Reginald Devereaux was murdered in West River tonight, Judge Kyley?" said Wildcat. "Scruter and Devine may themselves be so involved in this case, I would request they be barred from acting as attorneys before this court."

"What? What?" shouted Scruter. "We're not in any way—"

Judge Kyley only looked at him and he quit talking. Then Judge Kyley's glance went to Wildcat. They had talked before the hearing opened.

"I believe, Commissioner Gordon, under the circumstances, these men are entitled to legal representation," stated the judge. "I will give them time to obtain an attorney, if that is suitable."

"Fair enough," stated Wildcat Gordon. "Say an hour, Judge Kyley. I could use some dry clothes."

Scruter and Devine gaped at each other. They had expected to put over a quick offensive of their own in the gambling case of Slicks Murphy. This now had become something more than a gaming charge.

"We were, it is true, in conference with our client up the river," said Scruter. "We know nothing of any reasons for what may have happened after Wildcat Gordon's lawless violence."

"Telephone for your attorneys," said Judge Kyley. "You will remain here in the court."

BUT the hour had not passed when Big Charley Vuldoon himself came striding into the court. Vuldoon was white-faced with anger. His long fingers rubbed the thin, greasy hair over his bald top.

"I don't know all of this, Judge Kyley!" he stated loudly. "But I have learned enough to know that Commissioner Gordon's persecution is at an end! I have delayed only to obtain a writ of habeas corpus in a superior court, and I ask the immediate release of these prisoners!"

The paper was laid before Judge Kyley. The judge examined it briefly.

"I expected that would be your move, Mr. Vuldoon," he said quietly. "Of course, I can only release the prisoners, no formal charge having yet been filed. But I warn you—"

"I don't need a warning, Judge Kyley," interrupted Vuldoon coldly. "With all respect due, I am telling that I will make every effort to see that you are ousted along with your lawless friend, Wildcat Gordon."

"Why, you dare to address this court in—"

A bailiff stepped to Judge Kyley's side, whispering. Judge Kyley appeared to curb his anger.

"You are wanted on the telephone, Mr. Vuldoon," he gritted. "The three defendants may accompany you when you leave. Court is adjourned!"

Vuldoon's face wore a puzzled expression. He went into one of the phone booths at the rear of the court.

"Yes? Who is it ?" he questioned.

The receiver at his ear gave forth a weird, chilling whisper. Its tone had no hard note, but every word was distinct.

"Vuldoon, this is The Whisperer speaking. You will listen carefully and make your own decision."

"What ? Why, I have nothing to do with—"

"Perhaps you will, Vuldoon! If you were aware of all that I know, it is unlikely you would be permitting your protection to be used. I cannot speak more of this over a phone. But it will be to your interest to meet me as quickly as possible. You are being double-crossed, and you will be at Wildcat Gordon's mercy if you do not heed!"

"What do you know? What sort of trick is this? You have the voice of The Whisperer, for I have heard it once."

"You should not have trusted Knuckles Hamer!" said the eerie whisper. "Now do you believe that I know?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about!" blustered Vuldoon. "I don't see what you are seeking!"

An eerie, whispering laugh caused Big Charley Vuldoon to shiver.

"One thing more than you perhaps!" said the weird voice. "I want to get Wildcat Gordon! Now will you come alone to Forty-four North Third Street, at once? I'll wait for you. We have a common cause."

"I'll come," said Vuldoon, in a low voice. "But if this is a trick, I warn you—"

The receiver clicked. Vuldoon's face wore a slightly dazed expression as he rejoined the three defendants before Judge Kyley. The judge went through the form of releasing Murphy, Scruter and Devine. As they turned away with Vuldoon, Wildcat Gordon came striding angrily down the aisle.

CHAPTER XI
VULDOON IS TRAPPED

JUDGE KYLEY spread his hands and shook his head sadly. Wildcat Gordon's colorless eyes fixed upon Big Charley Vuldoon like bits of chilled steel.

"What is all this?" flamed Wildcat. "So you're giving the court a runaround, Vuldoon? Unless you're careful, you will have your hands stuck right into the middle of a murder! You can't get away with everything! A man died in West River tonight!"

"So far as I'm concerned, Gordon, you no longer have any standing as police commissioner or otherwise!" blazed Vuldoon. "Come on, Murphy, we are getting out of here!"

Wildcat was teetering forward, one fist starting to swing. Judge Kyley rapped out, banging his gavel.

"Not in my court, Commissioner Gordon!" he roared. "I'm inclined myself to believe you have gone too far! Stop it!"

Vuldoon turned away and hurried to-ward the rear door, followed by the others. Wildcat Gordon subsided with a scowl and a muttered oath. And Vuldoon heard Judge Kyley say, "Wildcat, I've stood by you in this about as far as I can go!"

Big Charley Vuldoon always rode in a long, armored car. There were others than the police with whom the West Borough boss was unpopular. Now his car roared away from Judge Kyley's court toward the north side. Two hard-faced bodyguards rode with the boss. One was driving.

"I'm making a call," stated Vuldoon. "It's Forty-four, North Third Street. We'll stop a block away, but you will cover me outside and if I do not return in ten minutes, you know what to do."

Perhaps it had been the mention of Knuckles Hamer that had persuaded Vuldoon to see the mysterious Whisperer. Or it may have been the common hostility to Wildcat Gordon that had been expressed. Anyway, the trick of The Whisperer, and the immediate presence of Wildcat in the court thereafter, was convincing.

Vuldoon could not know of the few words passed between Wildcat and Judge Kyley after he had left. At that, Judge Kyley finally said, "I don't know what you're up to, Wildcat, and it looks bad for you right now. You can depend on me, though."

Along North Third Street a traffic light had turned red. It stayed that way, as if the mechanism had jammed. Hooting autos crowded the street here. Vuldoon growled an oath and ordered his car pulled over. With his two guards beside him, he started walking along the street in the direction of the river.

IN the block above Forty-four North Third Street, old Quick Trigger was peering out through the iron fresco rail of a basement stairway. One hand was on the collar of a black bundle of fur with vicious fangs. Only a few persons were on the sidewalks, it now being well past midnight.

Three men swung into the block. One was Big Charley Vuldoon. Old Quick Trigger grunted, "Take 'em, Brian Boru!" as the men came close. Then the old man slipped through the basement door.

White fangs snapping, menace snarling in his throat, the Scottish terrier became a flying bundle of black. He whipped from the basement areaway. His teeth were in the ankle of one of Vuldoon's guards almost before the dog had been seen.

The guard howled an oath and kicked Brian Boru loosened his teeth. Vuldoon hacked away as the terrier nailed the other guard in a tender spot close to a kneecap. Both men were howling. The first guard jerked out his rod.

A low whistle sounded. The black terrier whirled, started down the basement steps. Both guards sprang, cursing with pain, and their rods spat flame. But Brian Boru was in the darkness and was elusive. Bullets smacked the stones around him. But as the guards crowded each other coming down the steps, the dog slid into a hole where a windowpane had been removed.

Brakes screamed in the street nearby and rubber burned as two police squad cars roared around a corner. Vuldoon's guards were both down in the basement areaway, when the police cars spewed half a dozen men led by the wooden-faced Sergeant Thorsen.

"What the hell's up?" shouted Thorsen. "Drop them guns, alla you!"

The sergeant seemed not to recognize the tall Vuldoon. Four coppers pounded down upon Vuldoon's two guards with guns boring toward them. And on the heels of these four cops came Wildcat Gordon, only to spring past them with his hands empty.

Before the dazed guards could turn, get set, Wildcat's flying right had punched one into a wall. The man's head clunked on the bricks and he slid to his haunches. One of the coppers jammed a gun in the other guard's stomach and clouted him expertly with his own knuckles.

"Hey, you damned fools! Don't you see who I am?"

Vuldoon yelled. He was being bumped to one side, then he was overturned down the basement stairs. Wildcat Gordon went past him, one hand holding a gun that seemed to vanish into thin air. Wildcat was at the street level.

"Sergeant Thorsen, get their rods!"

Grim-faced, Sergeant Thorsen was standing in front of the scrambling Vuldoon, who was trying to regain his feet. The sergeant's hard hands showed' little respect for the person of the big boss.

"Get up your mitts!" snapped Sergeant Thorsen. "Now, what's the big idea shootin' up the town?"

"Get away from me—you—"

Vuldoon was jerked around. Sergeant Thorsen's hand went into a side coat pocket. It came out holding a flat rod. The sergeant touched it across the end of his nose.

"Get goin', Vuldoon!" he commanded. "You ain't big enough to be pullin' fireworks on a public street! Into the car! Load in the other two mugs, boys!"

Vuldoon's tongue dripped with venomous oaths.

"Framed! By thunder, Gordon, you'll never—"

"Gun charges for all of them!" snapped Wildcat. "Take the two mugs along! We've got twenty-fourhours and maybe more before they can squawk!"

It could be said for Big Charley Vuldoon he knew when he was temporarily licked. He had not been armed. And he was fully aware the gun had been expertly planted in his pocket, but Sergeant Thorsen's picked cops were roughing his guards into a car and the sergeant himself had clamped the steel on his own wrists.

"You know, Wildcat Gordon, that you've made it more than an ouster for yourself by this," said Vuldoon, with sinister meaning. "You can go only so far, but it's the finger for you."

Sergeant Thorsen jammed Vuldoon into a car's rear seat. Wildcat Gordon stood swinging his hands at the curb. as the cars roared away in second speed. He did not reply to Vuldoon.

But he said over his shoulder, "Good work, Quick Trigger! Take Brian Boru along! I think Big Charley is all ripened up to lend an ear to whatever may be whispered into it! If he isn't, he will be!"

JUST as Slicks Murphy had stood in the rat-infested slime of a dungeon cell, so stood Vuldoon, the big boss of West Borough. He had cursed until he was hoarse. There had not been even an echo. The beady-eyed rodents scurried and squealed.

Big Charley pulled his feet from the slime by hanging onto the hammock swung in the cell. He had not the slightest idea where he was. In the last few minutes before the boss had been thrust into the filthy dungeon of the old seventy-ninth precinct, Sergeant Thorsen had seen to it he had been asleep. Vuldoon's head still throbbed.

There was no light. But once a gray-haired police sergeant came into the dark corridor with a flash torch and looked in upon him.

Vuldoon had sputtered, "Listen, you damn fool, I don't want any other cops to get in the same mess with Wildcat Gordon! It will be worth your while if you'll—"

"I've got my orders!" snapped the old sergeant, and flicked off the light.

Vuldoon had howled, but the man walked away. An iron door had clanged as if it were a long way off.

Now beads of sweat dripped from Vuldoon's forehead. His ankles had been nipped a dozen times by rats. At last, he succeeded in getting his long body into the precarious. hammock. Stale odors, the stench of sewage almost stopped his breath.

Perhaps no more than a full hour went by. But that hour seemed like days to Vuldoon. He tried to sleep, but he could not close his eyes. He was sure it must be long after daylight outside, though dawn was as yet hours away.

It may have been that Vuldoon dozed. The loud clanging of iron on iron awakened him. From along the corridor came a shout, then a groan. A revolver sounded like thunder in the confined space as two shots rang out.

Vuldoon slapped his feet into the slime. He could see the lighted square of a door at the end of the underground corridor. Three or four men were fighting and then the light went out.

Vuldoon could still hear blows. Another gun cracked. All at once there was a deathly silence. What went on out there? Every nerve of Vuldoon was strung tautly. Had some of his men broken in upon the police? Though his position was undoubtedly the most terrible he had ever occupied, Vuldoon swore heavily.

Damn it all! All mobsters were fools! They might mean well enough, but the legal advantage he held over Wildcat Gordon would be destroyed! Minutes passed without further sound. Yet there had been shooting.

"In the name of all the devils," yelled Vuldoon, "who is out there? Speak up! I'm back here!"

THE silence made Big Charley a little sick. It persisted for more torturing minutes. Then there was a soft, scraping sound. Someone was moving in the darkness along the wall.

"Who is it?" Vuldoon screamed the words.

"Be quiet! In a minute, Vuldoon! I think one of them's dead!"

Only a whisper. Yet its penetrative weirdness was like a crash of sound upon Vuldoon's tortured ears.

"The Whisperer? You?"

"Yes, Vuldoon! I have come for you! It was the only way! I saw you taken and I followed! I had to wait!"

A key was grating in a lock. There was only that and the whispering voice. "You have ruined me!" groaned Vuldoon "I don't care what—"

"Yes?" came the awesome whisper. "You think you don't care! Wildcat Gordon would never have let you go alive! Understand! And if that old copper out there is dead, Gordon won't dare to peep! Don't you see, when you are out of here, you have him—"

The dungeon door creaked open. A hand groped, touched Vuldoon. The blackness was Stygian.

"A light!" said Vuldoon. "We must see—"

"No!" commanded The Whisperer. "I have risked my life for this! I can help you, but there will always be darkness between us! Understand?"

Hands were clapped over Vuldoon's eyes. He protested, wildly. The eerie voice of The Whisperer became huskily calm.

"It's the tape, while we're together, Vuldoon, or you will stay here," he advised. "I have my own plans. If you don't accept, and you are still here when they find that old copper dead, it will be tough for you. For this cell door will be left open, but you can't get through to the outside."

Adhesive tape closed the eyes of the West Borough boss.

"Come," said The Whisperer. "We must get out quickly."

Guided through the darkness by the awesome whisper and the iron grip of a hand on one arm, Big Charley Vuldoon saw nothing of the inside of the old seventy-ninth precinct station. He could picture the old police sergeant lying dead, slain by this mysterious figure of the underworld.

Possibly Vuldoon would never know there had been no fight in the precinct station. For the old sergeant had been sent away by Wildcat Gordon, before he changed into The Whisperer. Aided by the groaning of old Quick Trigger and the thunderous cracking of his revolver, The Whisperer had staged a bogus battle for the benefit of his prisoner.

No other person had been about the station. Now a light truck rolled away. Old Quick Trigger had vanished. Big Charley Vuldoon was lying behind the seat of the light truck. The Whisperer was driving. Vuldoon made no effort to tear the tape from his eyes.

For the moment, the West Borough boss was stunned and beaten. This was the first time in his career he had become directly involved in what might be murder. Regardless of the circumstances, the quick-witted Wildcat Gordon would, without doubt, pin a rap on him if that old sergeant had died at The Whisperer's hands.

Little use now to attempt to break away, to proclaim the frame-up by which he had been seized. Possibly the inner conscience, or fear of the big boss, shackled the usually clear thinking of the politician.

THE light truck lost the noises of city streets. Presently it was stopped. The smell and the feel of open country was all around. And the silence of suburban solitude. It still lacked some time until dawn.

The Whisperer was beside Vuldoon. The whispering voice was low and husky. But to the boss it carried the sinister threat of a crook, a killer who had struck terror to much of the underworld, defied the police for months, yet had never been identified.

"Vuldoon, you have been a fool! Murphy, Scruter and Devine have been working a racket that will send them to the chair and take you with them if Wildcat Gordon finds out all the truth. Knuckles Hamer is in it, and he would double-cross his grandmother. He would take the profit and pin the rap for killings on the others, on you. I think you are too smart to have been in this. Am I right?"

Vuldoon said quickly, "Yes—yes you must be right, Whisperer! The scum—after all I've done for them! What is it you want? Tell me?"

"Just call me Smith, it's easier," said the husky voice. "You'll never see me. All who do, meet with sad accidents. What do I want? The same thing I entered the Random Club to get the night it burned: to kill Wildcat Gordon before he gets me. In that, I believe, we think together."

Vuldoon gave instant agreement. But his brain was working now.

"But you want something more than that—"

"Yes," said The Whisperer. "But I'll make my own payoff, Vuldoon. I am muscling in on the same racket that has double-crossed you. I'll do my own collecting from Knuckles Hamer."

The Whisperer waited. He could almost see the wheels turning in the brains of the big boss. That word double-cross. Vuldoon was entangled too deep, as he imagined, to do other than play ball.

That shrewd criminal brain was thinking how this amazing Whisperer might be employed to rub out some of those closest to him who had now become a source of great danger.

"You say you'd collect from Hamer—but if he lived—"

The Whisperer's laugh was like the rustle of death itself.

"I never leave one that might talk," He said. hoarsely. "Never one."

"You would join me in disposing of Wildcat Gordon, Whis—Smith?"

"Exactly—But I desire to collect plenty."

Again Vuldoon's thinking could be clearly read by The Whisperer. The boss was figuring far ahead.

And The Whisperer was fully aware that it took in another double-cross. That would be the disposal of The Whisperer himself. Yes, Vuldoon would be thinking that.

CHAPTER XII
THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

BIG CHARLEY VULDOON voiced a proposal.

The Whisperer was beside Vuldoon. Adhesive tape closed the eyes of the West Borough boss.

It came unexpectedly, but it could not have been better. For it involved the hatred that had been demonstrated between the boss and the leader of a social set, Mrs. J. Courtland. Also, The Whisperer was convinced it took in a possible plan fermenting in Vuldoon's brain.

A quick, daring stroke to remove the society woman. And with this, after The Whisperer had served his purpose, the Whisperer himself. Words rolled smoothly from the slick tongue of the boss.

Mrs. J. Cortland was friendly with Wildcat Gordon. She possessed an enormous fortune in jewels alone. Mostly these were her famous diamonds. All these stones were kept in her swanky apartment. The woman believed she was immune to crooks.

"She lives alone," stated Vuldoon. "You would know how to get those diamonds. The loss of them would break her, for she has put everything into her jewels. That is, it would break her if she did not at the same time meet with a fatal accident. After Wildcat Gordon, Whisp—Smith, what do you think of that? Not that I would be in it, understand, but—"

A deadly laugh like the chuckle of a ghost came from The Whisperer's lips. He was thinking, "Yes, Vuldoon, and who would be on the job to rub me out and take the stones, thus cleaning your slate?"

But he said, "It is an idea, Vuldoon. But about Wildcat Gordon?"

Vuldoon's laugh was shaky, but it was hard. He said that already a plan was underway to trap Wildcat Gordon.

"You will take me to the address I give you, and you will be able to see and hear for yourself, Smith," he announced. "It is safe enough, for it is a layout where I sometimes find it convenient to learn what others are doing without my presence being known."

A few minutes later, the light truck was rolling back into the city.

IT still lacked an hour or so before dawn when The Whisperer was crouched over a grated ventilator set in the floor of a third-story room. Vuldoon, his eyes still taped, sat beside him. They had entered a grimy, brick tenement on the waterfront. Vuldoon had indicated a secret entrance by the back stairs.

Through the ventilator came the tempting odor of oysters frying. In the doorway of a small kitchen stood a woman. In the single other room, of shabby furnishings, sat none other than Deputy Henry Bolton. And he was more than a little drunk, an astounding thing for Henry.

The woman was red-lipped, green-eyed and smiling upon the long-nosed copper. She told him his breakfast would be ready in a minute. The Whisperer could detect mockery in her red-lipped smile.

"The big, soft mutt," that smile was saying of Henry Bolton.

Henry's rating with The Whisperer dropped a few notches lower than it had ever been, and it had not been high. Henry was having himself another drink, grinning fatuously at the green-eyed woman. He was proving that any man can make a mug of himself.

Vuldoon himself whispered now.

"Marge Mowbray has been known about Slicks Murphy's club as the Queen of Clubs," he said. "She's a bad one, and she's beaten two raps for murder. But she's one of Murphy's best come-ons for suckers. There are two other nice girls working for the club on the same line. They are known as the Queen of Spades and the Queen of Hearts."

"Yes," said The Whisperer. "The Queen of Spades, she would be of the dark type, like Rosa Latoire."

"How did you know that?" whispered Vuldoon quickly.

"As I know many other things, Vuldoon. I do not know the Queen of Hearts."

Vuldoon was clucking in his throat. He said, "If luck breaks, you may see her before we leave here. Her name is Belle Nolan."

Temptingly browned oysters were set before Henry Bolton. Drinks whetted his appetite. A rounded, white arm was around his neck. The red lips were pressed once to his small, round mouth. Then Marge Mowbray apparently had brought him to the place where she felt safe to make a proposal.

Her voice was too low to catch the words for a minute. But it raised a bit toward the end. The green-eyed woman who did her own killing, who had stood on a launch and attempted double murder of Reginald Devereaux and Wildcat Gordon in the river, seemed sure of herself.

"And if Wildcat Gordon goes up there, he will never come back!" Her voice was caressing, but poisonous. "If you do that, Henry, then we will—" Drunk as he was, Henry Bolton thrust the woman away suddenly, violently.

Under all his personal ambition, his dislike for Wildcat Gordon, his feud against the commissioner in the department, Deputy Henry Bolton was still an honest policeman. And let it be said a damned good one.

"So that's it, Marge!" he shouted thickly. "You said you had gone straight! Damn you, I've been nuts about you! But all you've wanted—"

This Marge Mowbray, killer, Queen of Clubs, was an actress. She could put on a show.

"Please, Henry, if you do love me—I didn't mean it, honey—no, not if you don't want it that

way, Henry! I only wanted to clear the way for you, that is all!"

Convulsive sobs shook the woman's shoulders. Henry Bolton rubbed his head, trying to clear the fog from his brain. He had, without doubt, gone in over his big ears for the red-lipped siren.

"Well, if you say that's it, but I never want to hear any more of that stuff, Marge! Understand? Yes, I'll get Wildcat Gordon! The mayor is helping now! He will go out of the department, but not that way!"

"Yes, Henry," murmured the woman humbly. "Forget it. Let's have another drink. I'll do anything you say–"

"Why, the damned fool!" said The Whisperer to himself. "But he's a copper under his ugly skin. And that's something."

Then he saw Marge Mowbray's quick hand mix drinks behind Henry's back. A powder slid from a paper into one of the drinks. The glasses clinked, and Henry gulped his liquor.

A KEY grated and the door of the room below opened. The girl who stood there was a blond little thing, with a face that seemed almost childlike. She halted, looking at Marge Mowbray hesitatingly before she spoke. The Whisperer swore silently.

She was pretty, no bigger than Tiny Traeger. She had shining, big eyes, and The Whisperer guessed they would be of brightest blue.

"It's all right, Belle," said Marge quickly. "He's my friend. You understand?"

"The Queen of Hearts!" said The Whisperer.

And Vuldoon said it must be. He knew why she was there. He said the girls worked a little game of their own at times, and this must be one of the times. The Whisperer was looking at Henry Bolton and he saw Marge Mowbray's mocking grin.

Henry Bolton's head had fallen forward. A rasping snore came up through the ventilator.

"Help me put him in the kitchen, Belle," said Marge quickly. "Has that new pushover come along?"

"Yes—yes!" exclaimed Belle Nolan. "But, Marge, I don't know! This time I'm afraid I've—"

"Shut up! You damned, little fool! I hear him on the stairs! Get this dumb cop out of here!"

Marge herself half carried, half dragged Henry through the kitchen doorway. She closed the door just in time. A tall, good-looking young man was standing behind Belle Nolan. He was dark and clean of face, but he had been drinking too much.

The Whisperer instantly identified the man as Burt Danvers, and the third youth with too much money to spend who had bobbed up since the first of the accident murders.

His mind jumped to a new setup. He thought of the young man's connections. That brought him to a woman named Mrs. C. de Voorhees.

Mrs. de Voorhees was the wealthy aunt of Burt Danvers. The Whisperer tried to recall something he had heard. Yes, a story in the papers of the illness of Mrs. de Voorhees. A story in the society pages, for she was of the blue-blood de Voorhees. Burt Danvers was the orphaned son of her sister, and stood to inherit his aunt's estate.

These facts flashed through The Whisperer's mind as Belle Nolan laid a timid hand on an arm of Burt Danvers. She was introducing him to Marge Mowbray. She was saying that Marge was really her sister. Yes, Danvers had seen her around the Random Club, but like herself, Belle Nolan was explaining, Marge had been desperately poor.

"I told her about you, Burt, honey," said Belle. "She knows we are to be married. That we are going away and she—well, she wants to quit the life she has been forced to live."

Beside The Whisperer, Vuldoon was muttering, "Isn't it about enough, Smith? They'll have to get that damned cop out of the way. I hope Marge doesn't go too far with him. We'd better get out—"

"Wait!" commanded the eerie whisper. "We'll see this thing through, Vuldoon! Listen!"

"No sister of Belle's is going to continue to have hard luck," Burt Danvers was saying, with drunken generosity. "This is a filthy place! She can get out right now—I'll fix it—"

Danvers was producing a checkbook and a

fountain pen. The green eyes of Marge seemed to hold Belle Nolan in a trance. It was clear enough that this little Queen of Hearts had one heart that was not in this game. She was glancing fearfully around.

"I'll just make it out for a grand, and your sister can begin packing right now—" Danvers was saying.

Double footsteps pounded outside the door of the room. The door slammed open. Belle Nolan whirled, and her oval face was the color of chalk. It brought Danvers around, to his feet; the pen and the checkbook still in his hand.

THE WHISPERER saw the two sly-eyed shysters, Scruter and Devine. It was Scruter who walked forward, his mouth twisted in a leering grin. Belle Nolan was pressing the back of her hand to her teeth. It was evident this had not been expected by her. It was equally apparent that Marge Mowbray had been aware that Scruter and Devine would be trailing Belle and Burt Danvers to her place.

"Suppose, Danvers, you don't make out any more rubber checks!" snapped Scruter. "Anyway, not until you make good on that twenty grand that bounced right back from the Day & Night Bank!"

Danvers was big and husky. He bellowed an oath. One big fist was just starting around. But it was held in its swing.

"Can the rough stuff, big boy! Sit right down and be good! This is a nice place!"

The red-lipped Marge was holding an automatic jammed into the young man's spine. Devine had pulled another rod from a side pocket.

"Sure!" said Scruter. "He'll be damned good! He may be hot stuff on Lake Avenue, but he can't bounce checks for twenty grand!"

Burt Danvers stared at Belle Nolan. The girl averted her eyes and looked at Marge. She sank into a chair.

"Framed, by hell!" exploded Danvers. "The old badger game! Why, damn you, there is twenty-five thousand in the Day & Night Bank to cover the check I gave Slicks Murphy! That is—so that's it?"

Burt Danvers was staring at Belle Nolan as if he never had seen her before. The girl was as rigid as a small, white statue. Scruter emitted a scornful laugh.

"If you hadn't given the girlfriend a check for twenty grand, maybe Murphy's check would have been covered," he grated. "So that puts it up to you to get the money, Danvers, or we tighten down on you!"

Danvers was still looking at Belle Nolan as if she was a stranger.

"That check for the mink coat I gave you was only five hundred, Belle," said Danvers, with slow and sobered calmness. "And we were—why, to the hell with all of you!"

Danvers jerked around toward Marge Mowbray. Belle Nolan cried out, "But—Burt! I had to—"

"Don't worry, you dirty swine!" bellowed Danvers. "Murphy's check will be covered! I'll get the money! I'll get—"

"That's better, Danvers," said Scruter. "Now you can go. But you might have a talk with your precious aunt—"

The menace of two rods suddenly meant nothing to the raging scion of Lake Avenue. Scruter's sly face squashed under the terrific impact of a shooting fist. Belle Nolan screamed, sprang up and caught at the youth's arm.

"Please, honey, you don't know—"

Danvers rolled out another vicious oath. His flat hand slapped the girl's white face, and she fell in a sobbing heap. Perhaps Marge Mowbray would have used the rod, and perhaps not. Devine saw to it that she did not, as Danvers slammed from the room and the door banged shut.

"Keep your shirt on, Marge!" ordered Devine. "We've got that egg! Don't forget his aunt's nice little insurance policy for half a million made out to that sap! And a couple of million more he stands to inherit!"

Scruter wiped blood from his lips, and cursed.

"Belle, you follow that guy and do your stuff!" he ordered. "You be with him when he goes to see Slicks, understand? You know how to patch it up, and he's going to be surprised how much more he's in the red for! Now get going!"

THE sobbing girl fled from the room. Across her face was the mark of Burt Danvers' bruising fingers. Beside The Whisperer, Vuldoon spoke in a low voice:

"You told the truth, Smith, and I hardly believed it. So that's the bigger game they've been pulling, and me protecting them! I knew the girls had their little racket, but this puts Murphy and his shyster mouthpieces on the spot with me."

The Whisperer said nothing. But he was thinking, "You liar!"

Down below, Marge indicated Henry Bolton sleeping in the kitchen. Scruter ordered the woman to leave him a note saying that he had passed out and that she had been forced to leave with unexpected visitors to prevent him from being discovered.

The red-lipped woman said, "Maybe I'd better fix it so he can't talk. The dumb cluck won't play along."

She was gripping her automatic. Over her head, The Whisperer's hand slid into his clothes. Marge did not know it, but if her nice, murderous disposition had carried her to the kitchen door, she never would have passed through it, though stopping her would have broken up the clever, complicated game The Whisperer had been framing.

But Scruter stopped Marge and told her how many kinds of a damned fool she was. The woman's tongue licked her red lips, but she obeyed. She wrote a note, leaving it for Henry.

"Now you're blowing this dump for good," stated Scruter. "Deputy Bolton isn't of any more use to us, and he's on a spot where he'll have to keep his mouth shut. We just learned that Mayor Van Royston put over his suspension of Wildcat Gordon. Bolton will be acting commissioner when he gets over his headache."

The three left the place together. The Whisperer touched Vuldoon.

"Time for us to do some blowing ourselves," he directed. "But I am leaving you here. When I'm gone, take my advice and stick to cover, but Wildcat Gordon's out of your hair for the present."

CHAPTER XIII
FISTS OF A BRUTE

BIG CHARLEY VULDOON had heard it stated that Wildcat Gordon was out of the department. The Whisperer detected the sudden change in his tone. A new cunning that came into it.

"Gordon's out of the department," he said. "That changes things a bit, Smith. Gordon will keep. Maybe it would be a good idea to push ahead on that other deal. It's nearly daylight. I'd feel better, much better, now that Gordon's removed, if Mrs. Cortland lost her precious diamonds tonight. What do you think?"

The Whisperer considered this swiftly. He spoke as if he were debating another angle.

"Perhaps we should take Wildcat Gordon first," he suggested. "Well, if you think there's a big enough payoff in the Cortland stones, we'll say it will be tonight. You can return to West Borough as if nothing has happened. Then I give you a buzz when I've got the stuff."

Vuldoon gave quick assent to this. It was a bit too quick. His hard laugh suggested again that Mrs. Cortland should meet with an accident when The Whisperer tapped the strong box of jewels. He said The Whisperer would be let in on the biggest payoff he ever saw.

So The Whisperer glided from the brick tenement, leaving Vuldoon to tear the tape from his eyes. Two minutes later, he was sliding into a coupé alongside Quick Trigger, who had followed the light truck for hours, then waited.

Daylight had come, but with a thick, low fog over the riverfront that held less visibility than the night. It seemed that Scruter and Devine had arrived at this place in a taxicab they had dismissed. They had been some little time waiting for another one.

"In another few minutes I was coming after you, Wildcat," said old Quick Trigger. "The radio says you're out as commissioner. So I guess we ain't done so good. It would be smart to quit while—"

"Where did the little girl go who came out a few minutes ago?" cut in The Whisperer. "Which way?"

She had turned off into the first side street, according to Quick Trigger. He did not know why a husky oath came from The Whisperer.

"That's a dead-end on the river!" snapped the hoarse voice. "Get going, Quick Trigger! I thought there was something on the level about that little dame!"

THE coupé turned the corner into the dead-end street. The miasmatic fog swathed it for four blocks between this point and a West River bend. Quick Trigger did not slacken speed until his headlights picked out the low stone wall above the deep, black water.

"Into the alley there with the car!" said The Whisperer. "Be ready to go out the other end!"

His gray-clad figure hit the pavement, sprinting on his ground-gripping soles. He had seen the dim outline of a girl against the wall. The lights of the coupé must have startled her, causing her to believe she was being followed.

For, as The Whisperer floated toward her, no more than a blur in the thick mist, Belle Nolan's face turned and showed a spot of white. The Whisperer was close enough to hear her sobbing cry.

"Burt—I couldn't help it—"

The light, small body went to the top of the low

wall. The girl poised there. Perhaps the sickness of her mind, her desperation made the black water below less foul than the world she meant to leave behind. She was leaving nothing, not even the handbag still clutched in her hand.

Tomorrow, next week, some time, they would find her gruesome corpse floating on the tide. Perhaps she would never be found. Who was this come-on girl of a gambling club to be sought by anyone?

Who would miss a little Queen of Hearts who had at last broken her own heart and was making this her final deal in life?

When The Whisperer's iron-hard arm enwrapped the slight body, hurled her back to safety, Belle Nolan sobbed wildly:

"Let me go! You don't know! I want to die!"

She could see little of the face with the pointed chin, the whitish hair under the round hat in that fog. Tears were streaming from eyes as blue as those of a lovely, painted doll. There was not much sentiment about The Whisperer or, for that matter, Wildcat Gordon.

But his queer whisper said in her ear, "You little fool! Burt Danvers is crazy about you! Or he never would have hit you! Find him! I'll be standing by!"

"Who—oh, who are—"

She did not complete the question. A rattling taxicab rumbled into the block, its brakes squealed. Two men sprang from the door, running toward the river wall. The cab lights showed Scruter and Devine.

"Go with them!" commanded the eerie whisper, and The Whisperer faded into the gray fog.

This grisly play of death, love and greed must go on for the present. For, strange as it might have seemed, The Whisperer had come to know definitely that Big Charley Vuldoon was not the brain behind the murder racket.

Only continuation of the game, now that he was out as commissioner of police, would enable him to ferret out the mastermind of one of the most cold-blooded killer gangs in the city's history.

Vuldoon, none of the others, must suspect his identity at this time. So The Whisperer was dissolving into the alley toward his coupé when the trembling, screaming girl was seized by Scruter and Devine and pulled toward their taxicab. They silenced her cries quickly.

"Follow them, Quick Trigger!" came the order. "I think at last we are going places!"

"Damn if I want to go many more places!" grumbled the older man.

But Quick Trigger would have stayed with The Whisperer until hell froze over, and then have crossed on the ice to stick with him.

THE fog had thickened half an hour later. It billowed from the river and shrouded a rackety frame building. Once more, The Whisperer and Quick Trigger were in the grove of poplars close to Knuckles Hamer's roadhouse office.

The taxicab carrying Belle Nolan had led them there.

"You'll leave me here," instructed The Whisperer. "Return to the city. At noon, you will go to the Martin Apartments on Lake Avenue. I know the superintendent, and you will have a houseman's job this afternoon. Now this is what I want—"

Two minutes of instructions and the grumbling Quick Trigger was on his way. The Whisperer glided toward the old roadhouse. He went up over a one-story porch near a lighted window on the second floor. He might have been a billow of fog drifting over the roof, for all the noise he made.

Through the window, he saw the white-faced, wide-eyed Belle Nolan seated in a chair before a dirty, flat-topped desk. Knuckles Hamer sat directly in front of the girl, his bulldog chin thrust forward and his hand knuckling his forehead.

Hamer was talking with a bull-like bellow to his voice. Every word came distinctly through the rickety old window. Hamer was holding a flat, official-looking paper. Marge Mowbray was blowing blue smoke from a cigarette and keeping her green eyes on the other girl.

"It makes it nice, baby!" said Knuckles Hamer. "You played around with Reginald Devereaux before you met Burt Danvers, and that will make it look good enough! That damned Wildcat Gordon's out of the picture! His cops don't know much about how Devereaux got bumped off! It's perfect!"

"No! I'll never do that! I'm all through!"

Belle Nolan's voice was shrill with fear.

"Oh, yes, you will!" grated Hamer. "This last little will was made out by young Devereaux when you were giving him the come-on! It says, in view of your secret marriage, he gives over to you half of all his properties, including the two hundred grand life insurance of his uncle, Janus Devereaux! This, you will collect!"

"I was never married! I won't do it! It's—"

Hamer leered at her. He said, "Yes, you were married. That's all been fixed! Marge—and another mug—used your name and Devereaux's! So we have the certificate and everything. The justice who performed the tie that binds was killed a few days ago by a hit-and-run driver. Get it?"

"You can't do it!" screamed Belle Nolan. "I'll never, never—"

The Whisperer swore silently, kept his itching fingers from his silenced guns.

Hamer's brutal knuckles flashed up and out. They sliced cruelly across the girl's face, knocking her from the chair. Hamer roared a laugh of sheer

brute pleasure as one big foot kicked the girl's frail body.

The Whisperer's fist drew back. It was ready to drive through the window glass when Belle Nolan screamed, "Don't! Don't again! Yes! Yes! I will do it! Only you will let Burt Danvers alone!"

"Better! Much better!" leered the private dick. "And you will see that Burt Danvers goes to the Random Club ship, or your nice boyfriend will find himself standing on the bottom of the river with his feet in a chunk of concrete!"

"No—no—I'll do anything! Anything, if you'll let him alone!"

"Right! And any more stuff like that tonight, and he follows you into the river! Get it? Now go down and take that taxicab back alone. Go to Danvers' place at the Phoenix Apartments. We'll not lose sight of you."

For the second time the little girl called the Queen of Hearts went out alone. The Whisperer slid from the roof. He was convinced that this time she would go directly to Burt Danvers. That much she would do, though her own life had ceased to matter.

A ghostly chuckle of satisfaction floated on the fog.

CHAPTER XIV
MURDER THAT MISSED

THE WHISPERER'S silently moving figure reached a door in the Phoenix Apartments. He had arrived in a car driven by a dazed and frightened worker of the early morning hours. It had been commandeered by The Whisperer a short distance from Knuckles Hamer's roadhouse.

The bank note slipped into the bewildered driver's hand as The Whisperer left his car greatly appeased his fright. But he drove away still bewildered.

The door in the Phoenix Apartments opened under a steel instrument. The Whisperer was fully aware that Burt Danvers would still be sleeping if, indeed, he were present. The young man was there. The Whisperer moved noiselessly to the depths of a closet. He had not long to wait.

The door buzzer finally aroused Burt Danvers. Two minutes later, the young man was shouting profanely, madly. But a girl's trembling, but insistent voice finally silenced him.

"Not for myself, but for you, Burt," she pleaded softly. "You must get away, then I don't care what happens to me as long—"

Suddenly, Belle Nolan was clasped in the arms of Burt Danvers. The Whisperer heard his hoarse words.

"We'll fight this out together! There is but one way! I don't care about anything else! You must marry me, right away, today!"

The pair were in the dim room. The girl sobbed wildly. Burt Danvers drew her into another room.

"Wait here!" he commanded. "In ten minutes, I'll be dressed and ready to go with you!"

The Whisperer glided unseen through the vacated room. The door opened and closed. His grim chuckle was only a ghostly echo.

Morning newspapers headlined the suspension of Wildcat Gordon. The Whisperer read these. There was no mention of the framed arrest and escape of Big Charley Vuldoon.

All day the city seethed with the suspension of Commissioner Gordon. The stories had it that Wildcat Gordon had fled the city to escape prosecution for arson in West Borough, and another charge likely to be brought up as the result of the reported murder of Reginald Devereaux in West River.

Two stories had it that Wildcat was to be accused of that killing. A raging, indignant Mrs. J. Cortland called Mayor Van Royston. She threate ned immediate effort of several women's clubs to seek the mayor's impeachment. And during all that day, Mrs. Cortland called club women, gave out interviews to the press, and indicated she intended to carry out her threatened campaign.

IT was nearly midnight when Mrs. J. Cortland returned to her apartment on Lake Avenue. If she saw the trim, gray-bearded man who was acting as houseman on the sixth floor, she did not notice that he was a new employee.

Mrs. Cortland would have been amazed to know that this same houseman had entered her apartment early in the evening. His stay there was brief and furtive. The trim, gray-bearded man looked worried, and muttered constantly to himself.

He was still muttering after the hour of midnight had passed. Down at the tradesmen's entrance he waited.

"If this falls down, it is the finish for Wildcat!" he groaned.

Suddenly the gray-clad figure of The Whisperer came through the door the houseman had opened.

"Wildcat," pleaded Quick Trigger, "I wouldn't do this. if anythin' slips we will be—"

"The diamonds?" interrupted the whispering voice. "You've cased the place? You have an extra key, if I need it?"

"The stones are in the wall safe directly over the head of Mrs. Cortland's bed," grunted Quick Trigger. "It's impossible to reach them without—"

"Without seeing that she continues to sleep," said The Whisperer. "So she will sleep. Stand by, Quick Trigger. I have a suspicion I will not be the only visitor. There is a way up by the fire escape."

It seemed that The Whisperer was determined to make good with Big Charley Vuldoon, even if it

involved the danger of being seized in the act of committing a robbery. And shortly thereafter, he was moving with infinite caution across the luxuriously furnished bedroom occupied by Mrs. Cortland.

That belligerent society leader must have been exhausted with her efforts of the day to arouse sentiment against Mayor Van Royston. And she continued to sleep as The Whisperer moved her bed aside from the wall. A soaked flat sponge had been clamped briefly over the woman's mouth and nostrils. After that her breathing was deep and steady, and there was an odor of ether in the room.

The Whisperer's sensitive hands manipulated the combination of the wall box. Despite Mrs. Cortland's caution with her fortune in jewels, the wall safe was not as modern as it might have been. The tumblers clicked and the round iron door swung open.

The Whisperer reached in, hands swiftly stowing flat boxes about his clothes. Several of these he opened, glanced within, then closed again. He became aware that Vuldoon had not overestimated the value of the gems. The rare diamonds, emeralds and rubies must have exceeded a million.

The Whisperer had the last box in his hand when he stiffened and shrank closer to the wall. There was a scraping noise outside a window. Here the outline of the fire escape was shown against the night. And a man's bulky form was silhouetted against the glare of the city lights.

A jimmy made the window frame creak. The Whisperer started creeping toward the spot, removing and clubbing one of his silenced pistols. Then there was a rustling noise directly behind him. He pivoted as the beam of a flashlight struck his eyes.

"Stop right there or I'll shoot!" commanded a woman's voice that had no trace of alarm. "You will take the jewels from your pockets! And then—"

The woman was none other than the black-haired, steady-eyed Rosa Latoire. She was enveloped in a street coat. The catch of the window cracked. The Whisperer crouched. He had suspected there might be an added touch of the double-cross applied by Vuldoon. But he had not expected it to be so complete, to trap him from two directions.

But he was not standing still as this went through his mind. His lithe body jerked to one side, he hit the floor, rolled and was out of the light's flashing beam before Rosa Latoire could pull the trigger. The woman who had been the Moreland maid let out an oath. She attempted to get around the foot of Mrs. Cortland's bed, but she was not quick enough.

Fingers vised her wrist and she cried out as the pistol was wrenched from her grasp. The Whisperer did not pull the punch that put Rosa Latoire temporarily to sleep. As she went down limply, the window by the fire escape snapped open. A burglar alarm started ringing loudly out in the hallway.

The bulky figure of the ugly Knuckles Hamer rolled into the room. The private dick held a revolver in one hand, but he shook his head and jumped to the wall. The lights had snapped out. Hamer bluffed.

"Don't move, damn you, or I'll let you have it!" he barked.

THE WHISPERER had the advantage and he took it, diving low and hitting Hamer's knees with his shoulders. The revolver rasped across his head. The Whisperer drove a straight right, then a left into Hamer's face.

All the recalled brutality of Hamer toward Belle Nolan was in those punches. The revolver exploded and a bullet cracked a mirror. The Whisperer placed a blow that added a new kind of an ear to Hamer's ugly face. Then he finished him off with both knees in his stomach.

Outside in the corridor, the new houseman, Quick Trigger, was running toward the elevators shouting an alarm.

The Whisperer heaved Hamer onto the fire escape outside. An instant later, he had Rosa Latoire beside the private dick.

The black-haired killer Vuldoon had called the Queen of Spades was reviving. The Whisperer's eerie voice commanded Rosa Latoire to descend the fire escape ahead of him. It was well old Quick Trigger was creating confusion in the corridor, apparently uncertain as to which apartment was being robbed.

For The Whisperer had to carry Hamer's heavy body down the fire escape. A car was parked nearby in the alley. The Whisperer noted then that Hamer must have come alone. It was not apparent how Rosa Latoire had gained an entrance, but The Whisperer was thinking of the acid stains in the room of the murdered Mrs. Moreland and was sure he had the answer to that.

The woman's eyes held the venomous light of a deadly snake as she was ordered to the wheel of Hamer's car. In the darkness, The Whisperer's face was dim and blurred. But there was no doubt that his voice carried death when he spoke.

The woman started the Hamer car and it rolled away.

The Whisperer moved with lightning speed. His own unmarked coupé was nearly a block away. But five minutes later, the Cortland jewels were in secret pockets of the car and the figure that emerged from it had undergone a transformation.

In the apartment house, Quick Trigger at last had determined upon the right door. He had covered with all the time he could. Employees, the manager and a quickly arriving squad of police filled the hallway as the Cortland door was opened.

It was remarkable that Sergeant Thorsen and a

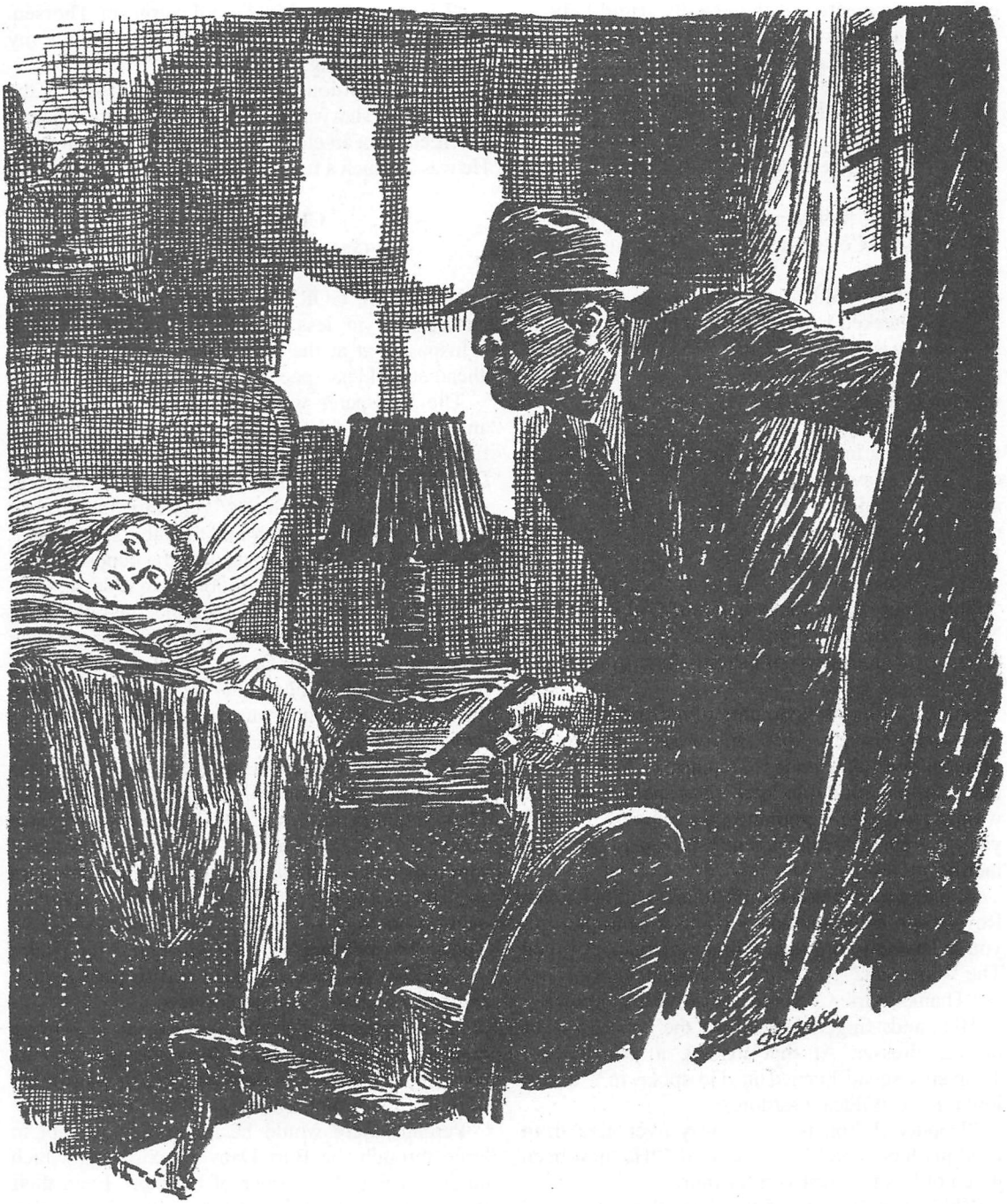
The Whisperer did not pull the punch that put Rosa Latorire to sleep. As she bulky feature of Knuckles

squad should have been cruising in this vicinity at this opportune moment. An amazing coincidence, until it was considered that perhaps it was more than chance.

For the law and the management of the house had hardly entered the Cortland door until the sartorially elegant Wildcat Gordon came from an elevator. He had been suspended, but Wildcat did not seem to know about it.

MRS. J. CORTLAND had been revived quickly. Her exclamation was more than angry, frightened complaint. It carried an implication of despair over the loss of rare jewels that not even full insurance could cover. The woman displayed raging passion for her lost gems.

"They're gone—gone! They could never be replaced! I would not accept twice their money value



she went down limply, the window by the fire escape snapped open and the Hamer rolled into the room.

for their perfection! It was The Whisperer! I heard his voice!"

Sergeant Thorsen looked at the cracked mirror where Hamer's bullet had hit it. Fragments of the glass had fallen on the dressertop. The sergeant picked up Mrs. Cortland's ivory-framed lorgnette. A heavy sliver had struck one of the lenses.

A woman's opened handbag lay on the rug. It did not belong to Mrs. Cortland. There was the imprint of an automatic having been carried for a long time in that handbag.

"The Whisperer always works alone, so far as the police know," said Sergeant Thorsen. "You heard others, Mrs. Cortland?"

"I've told you only The Whisperer!" flamed the society woman. Then she sobbed, something

entirely unexpected of the usually frigid lady.

"The diamonds—they were the only things in life I really cared about!"

"The Whisperer doesn't go around shooting up mirrors," insisted the matter-of-fact Thorsen. "There was a woman in this job, and two men who had a fight. There's blood by that jimmied window."

"Oh, if that fool Van Royston had any brains!" flared Mrs. Cortland. "Only Wildcat Gordon could—"

"Yes?" said Wildcat, standing in the doorway in a loudly checked suit and pulling his army hat low over his eyes. "What do you think I can do, Mrs. Cortland? I have just learned I may be facing a murder charge."

"You?" exclaimed the woman. "Well, you could fight Big Charley Vuldoon, instead of running out on it as you have done! I was ready to back you up and you let Vuldoon whip you out in Judge Kyley's court! The Whisperer was in here! He must be found, Commissioner Gordon!"

"I am no longer commissioner," stated Wildcat. "Many others have wished to find The Whisperer. None ever has. But I will ask Sergeant Thorsen to do what he can. I may assist, strictly unofficially."

"It would have to be unofficial, chief," said Sergeant Thorsen. "A murder warrant has been issued. There are witnesses who are ready to say you wounded Reginald Devereaux in West River, then completed a murder by drowning him. The witnesses are some of those who were on that yacht. They said you drowned Devereaux when a launch attempted to rescue him."

"You've been almost as big a fool as Mayor Van Royston," said Mrs. Cortland. "But I still believe you are the only one who could get this thief called The Whisperer."

"Thanks, Mrs. Cortland," said Wildcat quietly.

His hands fingered pieces of the broken mirror on the dresser. At that instant, a detective of Thorsen's squad hurried in. He spoke in a quick, low tone to Wildcat Gordon.

"Deputy Bolton is on his way over here from headquarters, chief," he advised. "He has been given orders to arrest you for murder."

Wildcat glided toward the door, flicking a hand at Sergeant Thorsen.

"You'll have to leave the case with the sergeant, Mrs. Cortland," he stated. During the next minute, he talked quickly to Sergeant Thorsen outside. When he had completed instructions, he said, "See that the word reaches the newspapers for flash extras, Sergeant Thorsen. You will announce that you received a phone message from me, and that I have personally trapped The Whisperer and am holding him at some unnamed place."

"Right as rain, chief," said Sergeant Thorsen. "When they get you and we know you are out, my squads are quitting."

Wildcat Gordon smiled. He slipped down the tradesmen's stairway as Deputy Bolton and a squad emerged from an elevator. Wildcat's face was grim. He was as much a fugitive as The Whisperer himself.

CHAPTER XV
WOMAN IN THE FLAMES

WILDCAT GORDON drove three blocks. He parked and in less than five minutes the gray Whisperer sat at the wheel. Then he shot the car ahead at reckless speed.

The Whisperer was now convinced the insurance murder racketeers must be prepared for a final cleanup. A murder charge in the Reginald Devereaux case had no chance of being made to stick with the *corpus delicti* very much alive. But as Slicks Murphy, Hamer and the others believed it to be, the hasty frame-up against the deposed commissioner could be made to look bad indeed.

But The Whisperer was not concerned with this. During all the day he had known nothing of the whereabouts of Burt Danvers and the girl Belle Nolan. Where had they gone? And where would be the final strike of the insurance racket?

The Whisperer was sure he knew the answer to the last question. That was where he was going. His car careened recklessly into an outlying suburb. The old family house of Mrs. de Voorhees was still occupied by the aged aunt of Burt Danvers. It stood on a hillside, with half a mile of isolating woods around it.

Who among the Vuldoon racketeers would be elected for this job?

Knuckles Hamer had failed to kill The Whisperer, and there was no doubt but that his arrival and that of Rosa Latoire had been timed to trap the elusive figure. That put Vuldoon on the spot as a double-crosser without the slightest scruples. But under his smooth veneer, Vuldoon was yellow to the core.

Perhaps there would be no further attempt to force through the Burt Danvers extortion, which might involve the murder of his aunt. Even their success in ousting Wildcat Gordon might not give the gang confidence for that final outrage.

This theory of the insurance mob's lack of audacity was abruptly destroyed. Ahead of The Whisperer's car came a sudden, belching explosion. It was accompanied by an instantaneous flare of fire over the tall trees surrounding the old family residence of Mrs. de Voorhees.

The Whisperer's car skidded off the gravel driveway and deep among the trees. He bounded to the lawn and started running. Now he could see one

ell of the old house billowing with flame. From the residence came hoarse shouts of fear and alarm.

Servants were streaming from a side door.

"She's burning to death!" screamed a housemaid. "Mrs. de Voorhees is in there! Oh, won't someone save her! The nurse is there, too!"

The housemaid got far enough from the house to be safe, and then she fainted. The Whisperer was darting to one side. Windows showed red squares. However that fire had been set, it had been meant to envelop all one part of the old house. The nearest fire station was at least two miles away.

THE WHISPERER was forced to halt, seeking a possible hope of getting into the second floor near the hillside. Oaths ripped hoarsely from his throat. No living human would ever enter that part of the old house. The Whisperer went around a clump of trees. He almost collided with a darting, fleeing figure of a girl.

It could not be told if she had seen the gray man in the light of the fire. For she suddenly screamed, threw up her hands and pitched to her face. The Whisperer was beside her, lifting her head. The blue eyes of Belle Nolan widened in fear as she looked into the strange face.

"You? You're the man who saved me! Oh—help them—she's burning in there—it was gas turned on in a room and an electric spark from the outside—I heard them plan it—I tried to reach her—but—but I didn't—Burt—Burt went in, but he didn't come out—he was—"

The girl's gasped words ended with a deep, gulping sigh. She had become unconscious.

The Whisperer was close to the rear of the house next to the hillside in ten seconds. He saw a woman flit through the trees, making for the highway. She was garbed in the white, starched uniform of a nurse. She was too distant for her features to be detected.

The Whisperer would have gone after her, but a tall, lanky figure was suddenly outlined on the roof of a porch back of the burning ell. The glare of the fire revealed the face of Burt Danvers. He was holding a bundled form in his arms, walking the edge of the roof, looking for some way to descend with his burden.

Then the young man saw the indistinct figure of The Whisperer.

"Help me, quickly!" he called. "I'll have to let her down!"

The growing heat was causing his clothes, the thick blankets around his burden to start smoking. The Whisperer's stocky figure stood below and he spread his arms. Burt Danvers must have been startled by the eerie whisper floating up to him.

"Drop her! I can catch her!"

Burt Danvers lowered the burden, dropped it. The Whisperer took the shock of the weight and fell, but the woman in the blankets touched the ground gently.

"I'm coming down the other side!" called Burt Danvers. "Wait!"

The Whisperer looked into small, twinkling eyes of an old woman. Her face was deeply wrinkled, but there was courage, humor and more in this frail old aristocrat, Mrs. de Voorhees.

"My nephew's a de Voorhees," she murmured proudly. "Even if he is called Danvers."

She closed her eves so suddenly that The Whisperer believed she had passed out. He produced a small flask of brandy. Old Mrs. de Voorhees took one long swallow, opened her eyes and deliberately winked at The Whisperer.

"I was hoping you would think of something like that," she murmured. The Whisperer carried her to the fringe of trees. He removed his dental plate and shouted. Then he moved quickly away toward the hill, watching for Burt Danvers to appear. Servants heard, and they were calling out when they came upon the little old lady.

BUT Burt Danvers did not show up. The Whisperer was going around the porch. Then in the driveway, going toward the concrete road, a powerful motor suddenly roared. A car shot out, rubber burning at the turn, and shot away.

The Whisperer glided back through the trees. He came to the place where he had left the girl, Belle Nolan. She had disappeared. Fire apparatus sounded sirens coming up the highway. The grass around

where the girl had been lying was trampled. Footprints of at least three men appeared.

The Whisperer made one more swift round of the house, but he did not see Burt Danvers. He had not expected he would. As the fire engines and trucks clanged toward the burning residence, The Whisperer was in his car, going away.

A grim smile of satisfaction was on the gray man's face. At least one victim designated for murder had escaped. The heroism of Burt Danvers had redeemed all the folly that had involved him with the insurance gang.

But The Whisperer was convinced that Burt Danvers and Belle Nolan were in the hands of the mob. No doubt, they had been trailed to the de Voorhees residence. A car had been waiting for the escaping nurse. It seemed apparent she must have been either Marge Mowbray or Rosa Latoire.

The Whisperer imagined it might be the first, because Rosa Latoire could hardly have been in the Cortland apartment and still played the role of nurse. Or was there still another woman in the mob unaccounted for?

Nearly an hour was required to reach a point opposite the anchorage of the Random Club gambling yacht in West River. This was the only lead now available to The Whisperer. Burt Danvers and the girl might have been taken hurriedly there, or to Knuckles Hamer's roadhouse office. But The Whisperer had found the roadhouse empty. So it had to be the yacht.

Now The Whisperer stared out over West River. A tug was working out some barges above. Its searchlight sliced around. There had been no lights showing at the yacht anchorage. And the slicing beam fell across the red anchorage buoy.

The Random Club yacht was no longer there. The Whisperer let out hoarse oaths. His car whirled, headed back toward the city and the West River bridge leading to West Borough.

"Now it has to be Vuldoon," he whispered grimly.

BURT DANVERS came to his senses. His head threatened to burst with pain. A thick welt was across one temple. He saw through aching eyes that he was in the gambling cabin of the Random Club yacht. A cold, wet towel had been slapped across his face.

A radio was squawking with news. Bulletins stated the residence of Mrs. de Voorhees had burned. It was a gas explosion. The report said that Mrs. de Voorhees had been mysteriously rescued. But that did not seem to affect the hard, confident smiles of Knuckles Hamer, Slicks Murphy, and the shysters, Scruter and Devine.

"So you've come around!" rasped Hamer, knuckles rubbing his bulging jaw. "You heard the radio. That makes it perfect. We know you saved the old dame, so—"

Burt Danvers started to rear to his feet.

"Sit down and listen, mug!" snapped Hamer. "Slicks Murphy holds your bum checks and notes for something more than two hundred grand! Get it?"

Burt Danvers looked at him and said, "You yellow scum! Nice forgeries from my signature, like that fixing up Belle Nolan's check, huh? Try and get away with it!"

"We couldn't miss, mug!" promised Knuckles Hamer. "Whether you are dead or alive, your grateful old aunt will settle for you! But you will do the settling, I believe!"

"I'll see all of you roasting in hell before I—"

A girl screamed in shrill terror. She screamed again.

"Please! Oh, please! Not down in there! Burt! Burt!"

Helpless agony was in Belle Nolan's young voice. Burt Danvers rolled to his feet and started a swing. He was no match for the trained Knuckles Hamer. His fist went harmlessly past the bulldog face. The heavy knuckles of Hamer traveled less than ten inches, and Burt Danvers felt his head rock back and his senses leaving him.

He was jerked to his feet. Handcuffs clinked behind him as his wrists were pulled back. Hamer's flat hand slapped blood from his lips. Again and again, the girl screamed on the deck outside. Feet scuffled and ribald laughter rang from several throats.

Burt Danvers did not have to be pushed to the deck. Hamer's fingers locked in his manacles behind his back. The young man shouted profane expletives, but he was held helpless.

"Not down there! Heaven help me! Kill me, but not that!"

One burly thug was holding Belle Nolan by her slender ankles. She was hanging, head downward, in an opened hatchway of the old yacht. Black bilge water, filthy and deep, showed in the rotting hold of the gambling boat.

A flashlight picked out burning, glittering, beady eyes. Huge gray rats scuttled and squealed where the water did not reach them.

"You see, Danvers, she won't drown or die quickly, but them rats are damned hungry and when they finish—"

"If I ever—Damn you all to hell!" screamed Danvers. "I'll kill all of you! I'll—"

"If you drop her, Jarky, we might be able to fish her out after this mug changes his mind!" interrupted Knuckles Hamer. "Let her go!"

A HEART-RENDING scream issued from the lips of the tortured girl. One slender ankle was

released. Her weight was suspended by the brutal hand of the thug, who twisted his fingers, rasping nails into the tender skin.

A great, terrible oath burst from Burt Danvers.

"Don't do it!" he shouted. "You devil from hell! Yes! Yes ! I'll settle for anything, for anything—"

Now there was more sheer brutality in this Knuckles Hamer than in most fiends. His tongue licked his thick lips in lustful enjoyment. A flashlight showed every curve of the dangling body of the girl. She was fighting, struggling futilely. Her screams were torn from her throat by fear.

Then came the frightful command:

"Drop her, Jarky! Maybe she'll keep until we get some regular signatures and add another hundred grand!"

The body of Burt Danvers jerked around, but he was as helpless as the girl herself. With slow relishment of his horrible job, the mobster called Jarky released Belle Nolan's other ankle.

There came one long scream, a gurgling cry. The girl was plunged headlong into the filthy bilge water. The face of Burt Danvers would not be whiter when he was dead. Words choked, died on his tongue. He strained away from Knuckles Hamer.

Then there was more faint splashing. A sobbing down there in the rotting hold. The flashlight beam showed Belle Nolan's oval face, her wide, terrified eyes, looking up. The big, gray rats scuttled, squealed. One sprang into the light and fell into the water.

"Now," said Knuckles Hamer, "she will maybe last it out down there until everything is fixed. You will sign a settlement, then you will go to your aunt and get the money. Nothing you can do will save your damned, double-crossing sweetie but that, for you'll leave here blindfolded and you couldn't send help if you tried it. Come on! You sign up!"

Burt Danvers heard the pitiful cries of the girl as he was pulled away. It sounded as if her small hands were slapping the water. Perhaps some of the gray rats were falling in, trying to reach her. But the light was flicked off and she was in darkness down there.

Hamer shoved Danvers down the steps into the gambling cabin. The handcuffs were unlocked. Slicks Murphy sat across a table, an automatic held lightly in his hand, just in case.

Burt Danvers rubbed the sweat of suffering from his dark face. A shaking hand held the pen that Hamer gave him.

CHAPTER XVI
YELLOW-SOULED FEAR

COLD, foggy wind of the hour before dawn blew upon the angular face of Big Charley Vuldoon, touching the greasy locks of hair across his bald head. His eyes opened slowly. His windows were over the lawn sloping down to West River. One was open now, wide open.

Realization of this snapped Vuldoon all the way to consciousness. He came up from the pillows, staring at the fogged space of the window. It had been closed when he went to sleep. For seconds, there seemed no special reason for alarm.

Vuldoon's hand went to a button over the bed. Light flooded the room.

Wildcat Gordon, gorgeous in a checked suit, stood at the foot of the bed. His colorless eyes were bits of icy agate under the brim of his army hat. The blue automatic in his hand was held lightly, but steadily.

Vuldoon's wide mouth started to open. Low, deadly words slapped into his ears.

"Don't speak, Vuldoon! Just dress, that's all! You know I would enjoy nothing more than to blast your guts as you are!"

Vuldoon's mouth flopped over words he couldn't hold back.

"You wouldn't dare to—"

"I said, don't speak, Vuldoon! Read, then dress! Maybe I'll take you to your good friend! That will depend upon you !"

Vuldoon's bulging eyes rolled, started as if they would jump from their sockets. Wildcat Gordon's left hand was holding a newspaper with one glaring headline:

WILDCAT GORDON NABS THE WHISPERER!
MISSING COMMISSIONER PHONES CATCH!

"That's it, Vuldoon! Dress, you rat! I have The Whisperer, you see! Have him where you can meet him soon alone—yes, very much alone! In the same dungeon from which he tells me he rescued you!"

Vuldoon arose like a man in some terrible nightmare. He crossed to a clothes closet. He could feel the icy, Texas eyes, the cold automatic chilling his spine.

"The Whisperer's pretty damned mad, Vuldoon," said the inexorable voice. "When I took the Cortland jewels off him, he seemed to have but one wish. Funny, he wanted to see you. You and Knuckles Hamer, and Rosa Latoire. Something about a little doublecross, Vuldoon. I wonder if you would know about that?"

Vuldoon was shaking himself into his clothes. His face turned over his shoulder and it was the color of greenish chalk. He looked at the pistol, into Wildcat's deadly eyes, and he did not speak.

"You're coming with me, Vuldoon, and you're doing exactly as I say, or so help me, I'm taking you to that dungeon and permitting The Whisperer to have a few minutes with you alone in the dark.

"He has the queer idea you helped him kill one of the old police sergeants and hide his body when

you made your getaway. But I wouldn't worry too much about the chair, Vuldoon, not after you see The Whisperer."

"Great heavens, Gordon!" gulped the Vest Borough boss in spite of the gun. "You can't do that! You wouldn't! Why—"

"Shut up!" snapped Wildcat. "Possibly I won't! But you're telling me where they've taken the gambling yacht! Where they are holding a girl The Whisperer babbles is the Queen of Hearts, and a Burt Danvers! You're playing with me to get your whole, damned crowd! What's another doublecross to you, Vuldoon? Now out the window and down that ladder! You're taking me to the yacht, and if that fails, I'll have to see that you reach The Whisperer before daylight!"

THEY crossed the lawn to a river dock. Vuldoon stood at the wheel of his own fast launch. Wildcat Gordon sat easily behind him. The West Borough boss was shaking. Wildcat had to start the motor.

Once Vuldoon made a gulping offer. Wildcat only laughed harshly at that.

The launch glided down, instead of up West River. It traveled less than a mile, and Vuldoon turned into a dark, black channel where there had seemed to be only stinking mud flats near an abandoned old warehouse.

Far back, perfectly concealed, where it might not have been located for days, lay the Random Club gambling boat.

"Turn off the lights, the motor!" ordered Wildcat.

Silently, unseen, the launch glided alongside the gangway steps. Wildcat's pistol touched the prisoner's spine. Words hissed through his teeth.

"You'll call them out, Vuldoon! Hamer and Murphy first! Tell them anything, but get them to walk out to the deck! If you fail, I'll split your spine first and take my chances!"

From far back along the yacht came a thin scream, a woman's terrible fear and pain. It was a lucky break for Wildcat that Hamer's thugs were still back there at the hatchway, licking their lips over the sounds that came from the black hold.

Four of them were back there. Four gloating strong-arms of the mob, listening to the weakening struggles of Belle Nolan in the black, filthy water. Listening to the squealing of the rats!

Big Charley Vuldoon appeared suddenly in the stairway door of the gambling cabin. Wildcat crouched behind him, just out of the light.

"Hamer! Murphy!" exclaimed Vuldoon, standing rigid. "Drop that and come out here! He will keep, and we've got to move fast! Scruter, you and the others stay where you are a minute!"

Wildcat saw Burt Danvers' strained face. He was holding a fountain pen over some papers. A stateroom door opened. The red-lipped Marge Mowbray thrust out her head, staring at Vuldoon with her green eyes. Over her shoulder appeared the black eyes of Rosa Latoire.

This was more than Wildcat had expected. Hamer and Murphy arose, looking at the boss. Vuldoon said, "Snap into it! We have no time to lose!"

"What the hell's happened, boss?" came from Slicks Murphy.

Hamer and he were clumping up the stairs. Down in the cabin, the sly faces of Scruter and Devine were filled with alarm. This was not to their liking. Chiseling for the underworld in the courts was more their specialty.

Now Knuckles Hamer's brain had more touch and go than that of Slicks Murphy. He was almost beside the boss when his small eyes darted over his shoulder. Perhaps he saw the glinting of Wildcat's gun or it may have been his red necktie. Hamer's hand jammed into a pocket, whipped out with a rod.

Flame lanced from the gun as Wildcat threw himself to one side. A slug chewed the side of one, yellow shoe.

"Framed, and by you, damn you, Vuldoon!" roared Hamer. "I'll end—"

The rod swung, but halted in mid-air. Wildcat's gun barked. Hamer's weapon went on past Vuldoon's head, flying from Hamer's nerveless fingers. He gave a deep, hollow scream, and that was all. His shirt front crimsoned as his bulldog face plowed into the boards of the deck.

Slicks Murphy squawked, "Don't shoot again!" His double chin wabbled, and his fat hands went up. He was as yellow as the boss who had protected him. But from the gambling cabin came an oath cried out in a hard voice, even though it came from a woman.

MARGE MOWBRAY'S ready, murderous rod had come from the bosom of her dress. A blaze leaped out and Burt Danvers whirled from his chair, dropping. The bullet had caught him high on one shoulder. Marge Mowbray's green eyes held killer fire as she sprang past the desk to put in a finishing shot.

Then Wildcat fired again. The bullet struck squarely between those green eyes. The woman who had lured Deputy Henry Bolton opened her red lips in a widening gasp. The green eyes glazed. The Queen of Clubs who had at least attempted two murders had died instantly.

Scruter and Devine were scrambling to one side, hands up, squealing, "Don't shoot! We give up!"

But oaths roared out. Jarky and three other mobsters who had been watching the struggles of Belle Nolan in the rat-infested hold came pounding along

one side deck. Rods were swinging. A slug whistled past Wildcat's ear. Another bullet scored his ribs and brought a profane grunt.

"Hold it, Vuldoon!" rapped out Wildcat. "Stay as you are, or else—"

Down in the gambling cabin, Burt Danvers had climbed to his feet. He was staggering toward the stairway, blood oozing from a broken shoulder. Wildcat Gordon dropped flat, twisted back behind the anchor winch. Lead spun off the chain drum with a buzzing whine. A bit cut over Wildcat's eye. Half an inch lower, and he would have been blinded.

The four mobsters rolled out vile oaths. One, yelled, "Go back! Drag out that dame! Finish her before she talks!"

Wildcat's gun shifted to his left hand. Already one of the thugs was pivoting. A flat, black object came from Wildcat's pocket. He had been thinking of the Random Club yacht when he had put it there. It went to his even teeth.

The flat missile left his hand, and it drove straight into the stomach of the first of the oncoming gunmen. There was a blinding flash, a ripping explosion that tore through the superstructure, crashed flame through the deck planking.

The first mobster ceased to exist. Perhaps it was Jarky, who had so enjoyed his role of woman torturer. If so, Jarky was not even a corpse. The shredded bits of him were blown by the blast upon those behind him. But none of them realized this. His three companions were battered bodies, from which their poisonous souls had departed.

Burt Danvers came by Vuldoon and Murphy. He went back around the clear side deck, hanging onto the rail, one arm dangling. The flame of the incendiary bomb caught the blasted side of the yacht and fire shot up.

Inside the gambling cabin, Rosa Latoire, Scruter and Devine were blown from their feet. They started crawling as fiery fingers reached into the long gaming room. The faces of Scruter and Devine were blanched with fear. But the black eyes of Rosa Latoire were still steady, their implacable fury telling of cold, murderous nerve that needed but a chance to send the woman, this Queen of Spades, into action.

THE fire bomb had driven down with shattering force through the rotten timbers of the old yacht. Already it was heeling, and water was pouring into the side next to the wharf and the abandoned frame warehouse. The blaze leaped the space to the side of the tindery structure. That side of the yacht and the building became immediately a blazing inferno, shooting a red banner of alarm into the darkness of the morning sky.

Wildcat had been nipped by flying lead. He was losing some blood. He had an automatic in each hand again as he brought Vuldoon and Slicks Murphy around. From out on West River the siren of a fireboat of the city department's marine division began screaming.

"You down there!" snapped Wildcat at the woman and the shyster. "Out this way! There's a bullet waiting for every funny move!"

Rosa Latoire came up first, and stood rigidly beside Vuldoon. Wildcat waved the guns. He had seen Burt Danvers staggering toward the rear of the yacht.

"Back along that deck!" directed Wildcat. "Murphy, if Belle Nolan happens to be dead, you'll not need to worry about the chair! I'll be leaving you here, permanently!"

Slicks Murphy's dry tongue ran along his lips. His double chin took on the color of clay. The five prisoners reached the yawning hole of the hatchway ahead of Wildcat's guns. The voice of Burt Danvers floated up.

"It's all right, all right!" he was saying hoarsely. "I'll get you out!"

The rising blaze threw a dancing light over the rapidly sinking yacht. It showed the upturned face of Danvers, with another white face on his shoulder. Black water had engulfed him to the armpits. He could use only one arm, and the rim of the hatchway was at least five feet above his head.

Wildcat saw no rope or other rescue aid at hand. His colorless eyes glinted.

"Vuldoon, take one of Scruter's ankles!" he commanded. "Murphy, you the other! Lower him head down. Scruter, bring up the girl first!"

With choice between a sure bullet and becoming a living rescue rope, Scruter uttered no protest. The shyster's thin body was whipped over the edge of the hatchway, held by the ankles. He groaned as he was pulled across the wood with the weight of Belle Nolan in his arms.

The girl was unconscious, but she was breathing. The lifting of Burt Danvers' heavier body was a strain that brought sweat of agony to Scruter and a hard grin to the broad mouth of Wildcat Gordon.

"Carry the girl, damn you!" rapped the order to Slicks Murphy.

Burt Danvers looked at the gaudily clad police commissioner. There were red blotches on his brightly checked suit that matched his necktie.

"No matter what happens to me, Commissioner Gordon, you're one swell guy!" he gritted out, the blood running from his own shoulder.

The siren of the fireboat pierced the morning as it swung into the dockage channel. But there would be no saving the yacht or the warehouse.

"Into the launch, Vuldoon, and so help me, I'll

have one more to my score if you try any tricks!" spat Wildcat.

The deck was only a few feet above water, flames driving the blistering heat of the fire upon them as the launch pulled away. Vuldoon again stood at the wheel.

"Out into the river, Vuldoon!"

Then there was another siren. Fire apparatus from the shore side of West Borough was responding to the alarm. But this was the siren of a police boat of the River Patrol. Vuldoon's launch was abruptly blocked in the channel, and a searchlight bathed the prisoners and Wildcat Gordon.

The police captain exclaimed profanely.

"Wildcat Gordon! Damn it! I have to pinch the chief!"

CHAPTER XVII
BLUE MURDER DIAMONDS

"RIGHT, Captain Gilligan!" said Wildcat Gordon, with a hard grin. "I am surrendering on the charges of arson and murder! It's your duty, cap, so don't cry about it! You will also, if you're smart, arrest Slicks Murphy, Scruter, Devine and Big Charley Vuldoon! Suspicion of murder and extortion! And the little, black-eyed lady! Handcuff her! She's poison!"

Vuldoon's bulging eyes swung upon Wildcat Gordon. Wildcat did not need to be told that Vuldoon's twisting brain already was measuring a new chance. As those in the speed launch were taken aboard the police boat, the West Borough boss could be thinking of but one loophole:

Wildcat Gordon now was powerless to deliver him to the murderous revenge of The Whisperer in a darkened dungeon. Wildcat, at least for the time being, faced charges. Except for The Whisperer himself, Vuldoon must have been figuring there was no direct evidence linking him with the accident murders and the insurance extortion racket.

And who would believe the testimony of the notorious Whisperer, feared and hated by crooks and most of the police alike?

But Vuldoon bided his time. He said nothing. When he reached police headquarters, the receptive ear of Mayor Van Royston, the place where he could wield a club of power, it would be a different story. Vuldoon would have had changing thoughts if he could have known of a police squad car that had been prowling the West River waterfront on the Midtown side.

This squad car was one of two that met the police launch when it docked. And Sergeant Thorsen, wooden-faced, unsmiling, came from the car that had been prowling. His face did not change expression as he saw the group of prisoners herded from the police boat, or the stocky figure of Wildcat Gordon in his bloodstained suit.

But Sergeant Thorsen had an announcement that came to Big Charley Vuldoon like a lightning bolt of hope.

"We found your car, chief, with the Cortland rocks all right, as you phoned we would," stated Sergeant Thorsen. "But The Whisperer has escaped, if he isn't dead. He broke from the cell where you had placed him. One of my men put a bullet, maybe two in him, but he made it to the shore of the river. A splash was heard, but The Whisperer did not show up again."

The prisoners, Burt Danvers and Belle Nolan were being placed in the two squad cars. Wildcat was looking at Big Charley Vuldoon. The sagging shoulders of the West Borough boss lifted, straightened. Every move could be read in the man's more erect body.

The Whisperer was dead. The single witness who could connect Vuldoon directly with the murder racket, the robbery of Mrs. Cortland. Slicks Murphy, Scruter and Devine, Rosa Latoire, they would need all the influence the West Borough boss could command. If they ratted on Vuldoon, they sealed their own fates.

Wildcat's colorless eyes flickered, but all he said was, "And that makes it tougher for yours truly, Sergeant." Still Vuldoon did not speak. He saw Sergeant Thorsen's face become gloomy. He knew Thorsen was Gordon's staunchest aide. A smile crossed the lips of the boss. He nodded slightly, with confidence at his fellow prisoners.

MAYOR VAN ROYSTON was in the police commissioner's office. Deputy Henry Bolton sat in Wildcat Gordon's chair at the commissioner's desk. The long-nosed deputy did not seem to be enjoying the post of acting commissioner as much as might have been expected, considering his great ambition.

Mayor Van Royston's retreating chin bobbed and he stared at the procession entering the office. Big Charley Vuldoon, Rosa Latoire, Scruter and Devine, and Slicks Murphy. With them, closely guarded by six coppers, stood Wildcat Gordon.

"What—what's all this—Gordon? So they've got you at last?"

His honor gulped, more at the dejected, humble attitude of Wildcat Gordon than at the inexplicable appearance of Vuldoon and the others as prisoners. Never before had he seen the fighting commissioner wearing an air of defeat.

Deputy Bolton's small eyes were hardly visible. He was stroking his long nose, looking at Rosa Latoire, at Vuldoon. What thoughts he may have had at the moment were his own. Of Marge Mowbray's proposal to him to help trap Wildcat Gordon. Of his awaking in her kitchen to discover that he had undoubtedly been doped before the one woman in his life had flitted out of it. Of some other items he may have discovered in connection with the red-lipped siren.

"You know, Gordon, you are accused of a brutal murder?" stated Mayor Van Royston. "What's all this, these handcuffs on that woman? These other s brought here as prisoners? You are hardly in a position to be bringing charges against others, Gordon."

Big Charley Vuldoon rubbed fingers across the greasy, black locks plastered across his bald dome. His speech now was the easy, assured tone of the confident politician, a man who has held power too long in his hands. If he had not been so assured of himself, he might have suspected that a final trap was being baited for him, and that he was walking right into it.

"You don't know the half of it, Mayor Van Royston," said Vuldoon. "I, myself, have been the victim of a frame-up, of brutality at the hands of Wildcat Gordon. He hasn't a shred of evidence to call for my detention. There are outside witnesses, I understand, ready to swear he killed Reginald Devereaux in West River."

Burt Danvers was not present. He had been taken first to the emergency hospital to treat a seriously bleeding bullet wound. Belle Nolan, still unconscious, had been removed with him.

"If this is true, Vuldoon," pronounced Mayor Van Royston, "Deputy Bolton, as acting commissioner, will order your own release at once. He will see that Gordon is held. Murder? A police commissioner under my regime guilty of killing?"

Even Wildcat's army hat seemed to droop as he crossed the office and stood looking at Deputy Bolton behind his desk. Vuldoon and others may have noticed the disappearance of Sergeant Thorsen, but it made no impression.

Wildcat's Texas eyes caught those of Deputy Bolton. They held a glint of humor, but it was like steel.

"The mayor is correct, Henry," he said calmly. "Vuldoon might have added that I am again guilty of arson. I just finished burning his damned Random Club yacht and a warehouse that belongs to him. To the best of my knowledge, Henry, I have killed six other persons this morning. I blew four of them to hell with a fire bomb."

Mayor Van Royston's mouth flopped open. His eyes tried to jump out of their sockets. The confident smile of Big Charley Vuldoon began slowly to fade out.

"That leaves me no alternative, Gordon—"

There was a queer hesitancy in Henry Bolton's voice, seeing that Wildcat had been the one man that stood between him and personal glory.

"Yes, Henry," interrupted Wildcat calmly. "I killed five. One of them was a woman. I put a bullet between her eyes. Shot her down. Perhaps, Henry, you have heard of Marge Mowbray, a come-on and a killer for Big Charley Vuldoon and Slicks Murphy?"

VULDOON started to let out a roar. The air became static. Henry Bolton was slowly arising from Wildcat Gordon's chair. His bony hands trembled. They clutched at the edge of the desk.

"I want to thank you, Henry," continued Wildcat steadily. "Vuldoon told me tonight you were trying to trap Marge Mowbray, because you had learned she was in a frame-up to take me for a little ride. It was nice of you, Henry. I appreciate it. After all, you're a regular cop."

Henry Bolton took two steps away from Wildcat's chair. He looked straight at him and he called him Wildcat for the first time during their association.

He said slowly, "Thanks for that last, Wildcat. You've got blood on your clothes." Then: "You'd better take your chair, Commissioner Gordon."

"Why, you long-nosed, damned fool!" howled Big Charley Vuldoon. "You let Gordon put that—"

Perhaps Henry Bolton had never hit a man as hard as he punched the boss of West Borough. A straight, clean knockout of knuckles into bone. A blow that deposited Vuldoon cold on the floor.

"I said, sit down, Commissioner Gordon," stated Henry Bolton. "I was acting commissioner only during your absence."

Mayor Van Royston's sputtering was lost in the suddenly edged voice of Wildcat Gordon. He dropped into the chair, swung his yellow shoes to their familiar spot.

"Lock up Vuldoon and these other rats, Henry!" he ordered. "The charges will be murder and extortion! Then call Mrs. J. Cortland and notify her we have recovered her jewels! You will say you wish her to come at once to properly identify them!"

"Bolton!" exclaimed Mayor Van Royston, "Have you gone crazy, too?"

Henry Bolton's lips were tight.

"I think maybe I have!" gritted the deputy. "I'll call Mrs. Cortland, Commissioner Gordon!"

Sergeant Thorsen appeared at the door. He looked at Wildcat.

"Everything is ready, Sergeant Thorsen?" asked Wildcat.

Sergeant Thorsen said, "Everything is ready, chief."

MRS. J. CORTLAND glanced with some perplexity from Mayor Van Royston to Wildcat Gordon seated at his desk.

The stately society leader then smiled with satisfaction at the mayor.

"It seems as if you've come to your senses, Mayor Van Royston," she said. "I don't know what has happened, but I am glad to see Mr. Gordon is still acting as commissioner."

Wildcat surveyed the friendly woman from under the brim of his hat. A blue, odorous cloud arose from the stubby pipe.

"Thanks, Mrs. Cortland," he said. "Possibly I am still here because of your efforts. I believe we have the jewels taken from your apartment. You were correct in saying you had heard The Whisperer. And there is no doubt but that The Whisperer now is dead."

A smile of pleasure lightened the woman's strong face.

"In your own language, you are an ace, Commissioner Gordon."

Wildcat nodded, flicked a finger across a wilted carnation in his coat lapel. "You have a list of the jewels, Mrs. Cortland?"

The woman unfolded a paper, laid it on his desk. Wildcat's eyes ran over it. His lips moved.

"Diamonds. Bracelets. Necklace, white stones. Necklace, diamonds, with pigeon-blood ruby." His voice droned through a dozen other items. At the last he said, "Necklace, matched blue diamonds.

"That would be right," added Wildcat. "They were taken off The Whisperer. Deputy Bolton, tell Sergeant Thorsen to bring in the stuff."

Detective Sergeant Thorsen was being called. Mayor Van Royston seemed paralyzed, speechless. Mrs. Cortland looked at him with her chin uplifted. It was the move she usually made when her lorgnette surveyed persons of lesser social status.

Sergeant Thorsen walked in, laid a package on Wildcat's desk. It was wrapped in brown paper. He took another smaller package from his pocket.

The brown paper was opened. Colored fire scintillated from the piled mass of jewels. But thirty or more perfectly matched blue diamonds of great size made up a necklace of more astounding value than any of the others.

MRS. CORTLAND started forward. In her deep eyes was all the passion of a lover of fine gems. One strong, white hand touched the necklace of blue fire.

"They are all there, Mrs. Cortland?" demanded Wildcat.

"Yes! Yes!" she said. "You've done a wonderful job! Wonderful!"

Apparently for no reason at all, Wildcat said suddenly, "You haven't your lorgnette, Mrs. Cortland?"

The woman's head came around, her gaze pulled from the blue necklace.

"Why, no," she said. "It was broken when the jewels were stolen."

"No, Mrs. Cortland, it wasn't broken," stated Wildcat, hand slitting the smaller package. "It is here. There are some other small items that might interest you."

He spread them out. A stained telephone instrument of white enamel. A stained hairbrush. The ivory-framed lorgnette of Mrs. Cortland.

The stately figure of the society leader was slowly stiffening as her head lifted.

"Sergeant Thorsen, bring him in!" rapped Wildcat's voice. "Mrs. Cortland, unfortunately you did not know where you broke the lense of your lorgnette! Or that the piece of it was beside the telephone that murdered Mrs. Moreland when she answered a call from you!

"And you have been so sure that Reginald Devereaux was dead, and that he was the only one who knew his uncle, Janus Devereaux, had those rare, blue diamonds that you were willing to take a chance on claiming them! It is true that—"

Mrs. Cortland swung around. Young Reginald Devereaux stood in the doorway, very much alive. He said, "That's right! I was the only person my uncle had told about receiving the blue diamonds! Me, and the one who murdered him and stole them from his apartment! He told me he intended them as a gift for a woman, Mrs. Cortland!"

The society woman's strong right hand darted toward the bosom of her dress. Wildcat's feet hit the floor. He was forced to smash a fist into the woman's beautiful face, to prevent the use of the pistol that had come into her hand. As she fell, Sergeant

Thorsen and Deputy Bolton secured her arms.

Blood crimsoned the woman's lips. Words bubbled with rage.

"Big Charley Vuldoon! Damn him to hell! He—"

"Might have been double-crossing you, just as you were ready to double-cross him," stated Wildcat grimly. "You murdered Mrs. Moreland and Janus Devereaux with your own hands. You sent through a telephone call that set up an electrical connection and was intended to end the life of Mrs. de Voorhees in a fire. You conspired with Vuldoon to have Rosa Latoire in your apartment to kill The Whisperer, who was working with Vuldoon. And Knuckles Hamer was in on that one."

A detective pushed another scowling, haggard prisoner with pouchy eyes into the room. None would have recognized Cyrus K. Moreland, Jr., who had been held in one of The Whisperer's hide-outs, if Wildcat had not named him.

"Of all the suckers you framed into becoming murder accomplices, this young Moreland is the only one who went through with it," stated Wildcat. "Reginald Devereaux was too doped on the Random Club ship to know what was really being framed. He had been told it would be robbery, but he had told no one about the blue diamonds and you counted on that, Mrs. Cortland, when you could not resist taking them. You would have let the others split the insurance of Janus Devereaux, but you had the stones."

Mrs. Cortland seemed to be obsessed with the belief Vuldoon had been a double-crosser.

"Yes, Mrs. Cortland," stated Wildcat, "you have been clever as hell. So clever that you imagined none could ever suspect you were really a woman known in the underworld of London as Diamond Nell, and that you gained the confidence of and murdered the real Mrs. Cortland ten years ago. I have checked on that.

"You complimented me as being an ace. So an ace this time takes a queen—a murder Queen of Diamonds!"

THE woman with the crimsoned mouth, the virulent tongue, the brains of Big Charley Vuldoon's insurance murder racket, had been taken out. Mayor Van Royston shook himself from what had seemed to be almost a stupor.

"The whole thing is damnable—damnable!" he exclaimed. "Anyway, at last we know The Whisperer is dead!"

Wildcat puffed smoke from his odorous pipe and grinned slightly. He did not reply, but picked up the telephone. In a minute he was speaking. "Mrs. de Voorhees," he said to the little old lady who had winked at him over a drink of brandy, "the police wish to report the safety of the young man you say is more of a Voorhees than a Danvers. His bride is with him, and I am sending them to you soon. You will like her, Mrs. de Voorhees. You can accept the word of the police commissioner that she's a little queen—a real Queen of Hearts."

THE END

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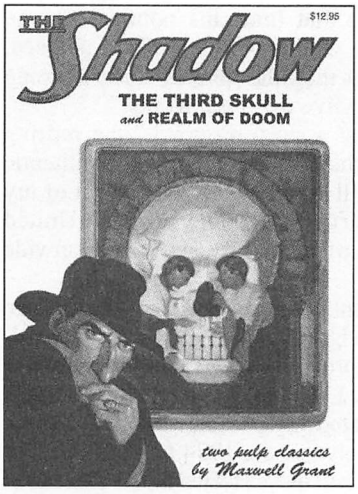

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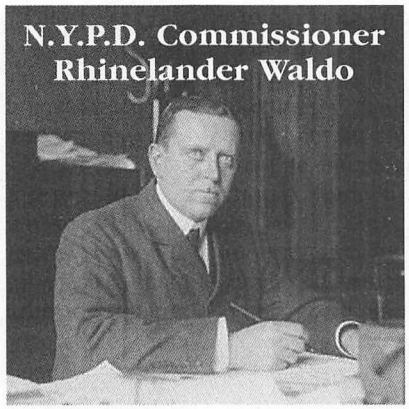
INTERLUDE by Will Murray

From late in the first Whisperer series come two consecutive novels of hard-hitting violence. Introduced in the Autumn of 1936, The Whisperer had by 1937 evolved into a force for vigilante justice subscribing to the ancient Biblical credo: "An eye for an eye."

Speculating on the origins and models for a character like James "Wildcat" Gordon is a game of intrigue. Young, two-fisted and hardboiled, he was a far cry from the traditional pulp-magazine depiction of the big-city police commissioner, whether it be The Shadow's stuffy Ralph Weston or the brusque Stanley Kirkpatrick of *The Spider.*

James Gordon appears to be a fusion of Grover A. Whalen, New York's commissioner of police from 1928-1930, Lewis J. Valentine, who held the post from 1934-1945, and an early Manhattan police chief, Rhinelander Waldo, who was appointed to the position in 1911.


N.Y.P.D. Commissioner Rhinelander Waldo

Waldo was the innovative eighth police commissioner for the city of New York. A veteran of the Spanish-American War who fought in the Philippines, Captain Waldo became the first Deputy Police Commissioner in 1906, at the unheard-of age of 28.

Following that was a stint as Fire Commissioner, during which the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, in which 146 died, took place.

Appointed Commissioner of Police in 1911, Waldo was instrumental in motorizing the force, creating the Motor-Cycle Squad within weeks of his appointment. He also organized three tough "Strong Arm" anti-vice squads, very much like Sergeant Thorsen's hard-hitting "dependables."

He was not long in the job. Hearing that the incoming mayor would not retain him in the post, Commissioner Waldo tendered his resignation to outgoing Mayor Ardolph Kline, who fired him, fearing an absence of police command over the New Year's holiday.

No doubt it was Street & Smith General Manager Henry W. Ralston who offered up Waldo as an early model for Wildcat Gordon. Ralston had built Doc Savage around another Spanish-American War veteran, Colonel Richard Henry Savage, who fought in Cuba. Born in 1881, Ralston was old enough to remember that conflict and its heroes.

Commissioner Grover Whalen was distinguished by his immaculate attire and signature gardenia boutonnière, as well as his ongoing feud with the equally natty New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker. Walker was doubtless the model for Mayor Van Royston. Whalen was a rigorous enforcer of then-current Prohibition laws who famously said, "There is plenty of law at the end of a nightstick." Vain and haughty, Whalen was nicknamed "The Gardenia of the Law." He later conceived the 1939 New York World's Fair, serving as its president.

Lewis J. Valentine was an honest beat cop who rose through the ranks, rooting out corruption in the police department in his work for the central espionage bureau, now known as Internal Affairs. As successive reform and Tammany administrations came and went, Valentine's fortunes rose and fell.

Honest yet brutally tough in his methods, Valentine was appointed in 1934 by newly elected reform Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia to clean up the city. He fired, reprimanded or fined thousands of recalcitrant police officers until the notoriously compromised force was transformed into a model for honesty.

Commissioner Valentine went after political corruption and the criminal element with equal ferocity, virtually driving much of the gambling, prostitution and other vice rings into hiding. He was uncompromising in his approach to professional criminals. Noticing a well-dressed hood standing in a police lineup, Valentine reportedly told his detectives, "I don't want those hoodlums coming in looking as if they stepped out of a barber's chair. From now on, bring 'em in mussed up. Blood should be smeared all over the velvet collar." Wildcat Gordon couldn't have put it any more bluntly.

He retired in 1945 to become "Chief Investigator-Commentator" for the long-running *Gang Busters* radio program. At that time, his political patron, Mayor LaGuardia, who was still in office, advised, "Busting gangs on the microphone, Lew, is going to be real easy.... Give them the works."

"This is not just a story program," the retiring Valentine said of the career move. "It has authentic facts. I feel this will serve as part and parcel of my continuance to serve the people of these United States to the best of my ability on this nationwide radio program."

Yet within months, again heeding the call to duty, Valentine resigned to help reorganize Japan's postwar police force. He died unexpectedly in 1946. A year later, LaGuardia passed away. Jointly, they had dominated Manhattan politics for an unprecedented twelve years, 1934 to 1946.

To fully appreciate these stories in the context of their times, imagine Jimmy Cagney playing Wildcat

James Cagney in *The Fighting 69th*

Gordon. For James Cagney's screen persona was unmistakably the model for James Gordon. Both men were diminutive sticks of fiery-haired dynamite. Cagney's distinctive mannerisms—slangy staccato speech and cocky ways, chief among them putting his feet up on his desk—are reflected perfectly in Wildcat Gordon. Of course that fact that they share the same first name is a dead giveaway.

James Francis Cagney, Jr. (1899-1986) was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. During his early career, he was a vaudeville dancer, comedian and acted in numerous Broadway plays, moving into films in 1930 when a play he was starring in, *Penny Arcade*, was made into the Warner Brothers feature, *Sinners' Holiday*. Thus began a long but tumultuous association with the studio.

In *Sinners' Holiday*, Cagney played a semi-sympathetic tough guy, and over the next year played variations on the part, culminating in his breakthrough role as doomed soldier-turned-gangster Tom Powers in 1931's *The Public Enemy.*

Although Jimmy Cagney branched out into other roles, employing his considerable dancing skills in future films, it was as a cinematic tough guy that audiences identified with him. In the 1932 film *Taxi!*, he uttered the famous gangster line which became forever associated with him. Cagney impressionists always gave it as "Mmm, you dirty rat!" But Cagney himself denied ever saying it. The actual line was "Come out and take it, you dirty, yellow-bellied rat, or I'll give it to you through the door!"

Whenever Wildcat Gordon derides crooks and killers as "rats," it was in homage to Jimmy Cagney. Indeed, the Warner Brothers milieu of inner-city reality and its sociological concerns are perfectly mirrored in the bleak world of Wildcat Gordon. During the run of *The Whisperer* magazine, Cagney was at odds with the Warner brass, and went to work for Grand National, an independent studio which soon folded. By 1938, he was back on the familiar Warner Brothers lot. A procession of memorable films followed, *Angels with Dirty Faces, The Roaring Twenties, White Heat* and many others.

With George Raft, Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson, Cagney was at the top of Warner Brothers' infamous "Murderers' Row"—the group of acclaimed actors who specialized in playing assorted hoods and heavies.

Jimmy Cagney's final film role brought him out of retirement in 1981. Ironically, he played Commissioner Rhinelander Waldo in *Ragtime.* Cagney was 81 when he played the 30-something Waldo—but Hollywood has never been a stickler for historical accuracy.

James Cagney as Waldo in *Ragtime*

There is one final piece of the puzzle that is James "Wildcat" Gordon's family name. The solution may be as simple as this: In Europe, a wildcat is known as Gordon's cat.

Murder Queens was submitted to editor John L. Nanovic on February 11, 1937 under the title "Four Murder Queens."

Relationships between the sexes were treated in a more realistic way in this hard-hitting series. And female villains—rare in both *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow*—such as the distaff quartet comprising *Murder Queens,* were common.

Just as Jimmy Cagney famously pushed a breakfast grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face in *The Public Enemy*, Wildcat Gordon wasn't afraid to treat female criminals with his own brand of rough justice. Even The Shadow never shot a woman between the eyes!

Kill Them First! was written on the heels of *Murder Queens*—and refers back to it. This tough tale appeared in the October 1937 issue of *The Whisperer.* It's a bruising battle to the death between The Whisperer and The Black Hood.

Years later, a superhero by that same name would become famous in comic books and on radio, but other than the coincidence of aliases, the characters are entirely unalike. However, as they often did, Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger lifted the plot from the pages of *The Whisperer. Kill Them First!* resembles "Murder on Parole" from *Batman* #6, Aug-Sept '41. It's pure Warner Brothers stuff, centering on the human interest drama of an ordinary couple caught up in the crossfires of career criminals, one man's desperate efforts to go straight—and one of Laurence Donovan's most searing Whisperer exploits. Read it now! •

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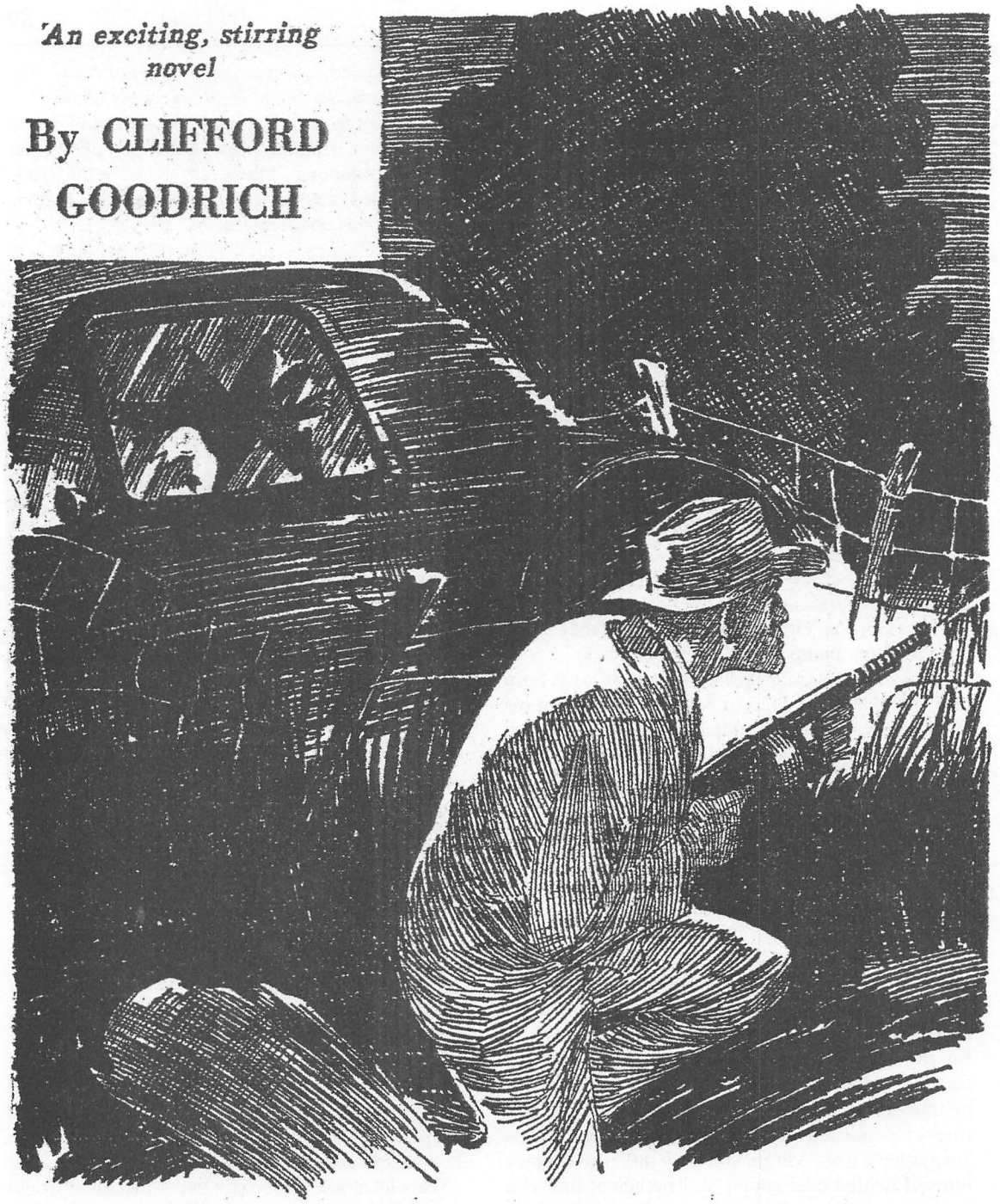


[When regular law fails to hold a band of killers in check, The Whisperer uses his own law to]

KILL THEM FIRST!

CHAPTER I
MURDER AND A GIRL

HE was driving his ten-ton truck to a rendezvous with murder. In a few minutes, the past he believed he had escaped was to close in upon him with a grim and bloody hand. But Jim Duval knew nothing of this.

Jim whistled "Killarney," with a merry glint in his blue eyes, as the gates in the barbed, steel fence were opened by a pensioner watchman. His gaze slanted to the lighted windows of Unity Steel Products.

Jim could see a fair-haired girl outlined in one window. He knew she was listening for the rumble of his great truck. She would be waiting for his whistle, his step at the office door. The girl was Barbara Rand. She was assistant cashier at Unity Steel Products, a branch of the powerful Unity Corporations.

Though designed to carry tons of steel, the long vehicle tonight carried a much lighter but much more valuable load. This was in a leather sack on the seat beside Jim. His elbow touched it. The sack held thirty thousand-odd dollars of payroll money.

This delivery of the leather sack by the big, empty truck was a good idea of some higher-up in Unity Corporations. It happened at odd times twice monthly. The time for each delivery was fixed in the main offices only in the afternoon of the day selected. Jim Duval was never informed more than a few hours in advance.

Payroll robberies had been frequent in the past weeks. It had caused the new system. The protection lay in the simplicity, the openness of the plan. So Jim Duval did not know murder was even then stalking him in the darkness ahead.

The use of the heavy truck was devised after

lighter and armored vehicles had been held up and robbed. Jim Duval was selected at Unity Steel Products because of his good service record of five years. Jim took more than ordinary pride in the confidence placed in his honesty. He had two excellent reasons for this pride:

The first was an open secret. Though an assistant cashier, the fair-haired, delightful Barbara Rand was very much in love with the giant driver. Jim expected soon to be promoted to foreman of the transportation fleet, and when that took place, it was agreed that they should be married.

But the second reason for Jim Duval's pride was his own secret, or he believed it to be: none at Unity Steel, not even Barbara Rand, was aware that Jim Duval had been a paroled convict. For five years, Jim had been clear of his parole record. That had been because his single conviction, his one offense against the law, had been manslaughter.

Jim never had been and had never felt as if he had been a criminal. True, a man had been killed, but it had not been a death connected with crooked intent, if indeed there had been any intent whatever to cause the other man's death. Nevertheless, Jim had served a brief time and had been duly granted a parole.

Then he had come into the big town and become a driver for Unity Steel, of Unity Corporations. So his pride in being trustworthy enough to handle thousands of company money was justified. He was thinking of this now as he whistled cheerfully.

"Killarney!" It was the tune that Barbara would be listening for with tenderness in her heart.

"And," thought Jim Duval tonight, "I'll tell her about it one of these days before we are married." Best to have even such a slight blot on his life understood by the girl who would be his wife. And he was sure that Barbara would understand. He would have been greatly surprised if he had known that the girl had been informed of his past record ever since she had first become his friend.

Jim's truck lights sliced the dusty darkness inside the plant gates. The gray-haired watchman raised a friendly hand. Everyone liked Jim.

Jim's foot was pressing the accelerator to shoot the long truck into the yard filled with piled steel. He released the pressure suddenly. The tuneful whistle died on his lips. The glint in his blue eyes hardened.

The lights swung to one side, and what happened was uncertain. Then it became clear. The old watchman's hand was still flung up in greeting as he fell squarely across the pathway of the truck. The brakes squealed.

Jim saw a shadowy figure leap forward, then back. There was an abrupt roar of a motor and a grinding of gears in another car. It was a closed car, a sedan. Its hood projected suddenly, squarely across the bumper of the big truck.

THE following ten or fifteen seconds were confusing. Jim had started to jump from the truck seat, acting instinctively. At first, he had not been sure that the gate watchman had been knocked in front of the truck. Jim thought perhaps he had fallen, and when he glimpsed the shadowy, vanishing figure, he was already on the ground.

That three seconds of apprehension for the old watchman had perhaps been timed to the second. It had caused Jim momentarily to forget the payroll sack, the automatic pistol carried loosely in his coat.

But as the watchman rolled over, attempted to rise, blood spurted from the side of his neck under one ear. The weapon with which the old man had been hit was a short angle bar of steel. Crushing one side of the man's skull, the end of the iron tore through the thin throat muscles.

Jim's next instinctive action was to whirl toward the sedan which, in its turn, had almost run down the watchman's prostrate body. His hand then dipped into a coat pocket. Perhaps it was the same man who had struck the watchman down, then leaped aside, who hurled the crushing angle bar.

The weighty steel rapped across Jim's shoulders, throwing him to one side. The pistol jumped from his hand. An instant later, it was snatched up. Blue fire sliced from its muzzle. Possibly the muscles of the old watchman quivered as three bullets were pumped into his body.

Jim was partly stunned, but not seriously hurt. He was heaving himself to his feet when a Browning gun was thrust into his stomach, jamming him back against his truck. Three or four men wearing tight masks sprang from the sedan and one swept the payroll sack from the truck seat.

Jerry Harbison, driving a radio patrol car, rounded the corner about fifty yards away. His partner, "Slim" Rucker, was kicking open the police car door even before Harbison let out an oath of alarm and stepped on the gas. There were five or six of the masked men in and around the sedan.

One of the holdups dropped deliberately to one knee and a "chopper" began jolting. Slim Rucker had no opportunity to get his own gun from its holster. His body was cut almost in two as he slipped from the running board.

Harbison shot the squad car ahead, smashing directly into the rear of the big steel truck. As metal clashed and slugs started cobwebs spreading in the police car's windshield, Harbison rolled out, shooting. He had seen Rucker's fall and heard the screaming of bullets.

Clear of the tangled wreckage, Harbison dropped for cover, but caught one masked figure in the headlights of the truck. The copper's aim was good, and the masked man threw up his hands and fell at the first shot. At this, Harbison was left in

darkness as the truck's lights were smashed and those on the sedan were flicked off.

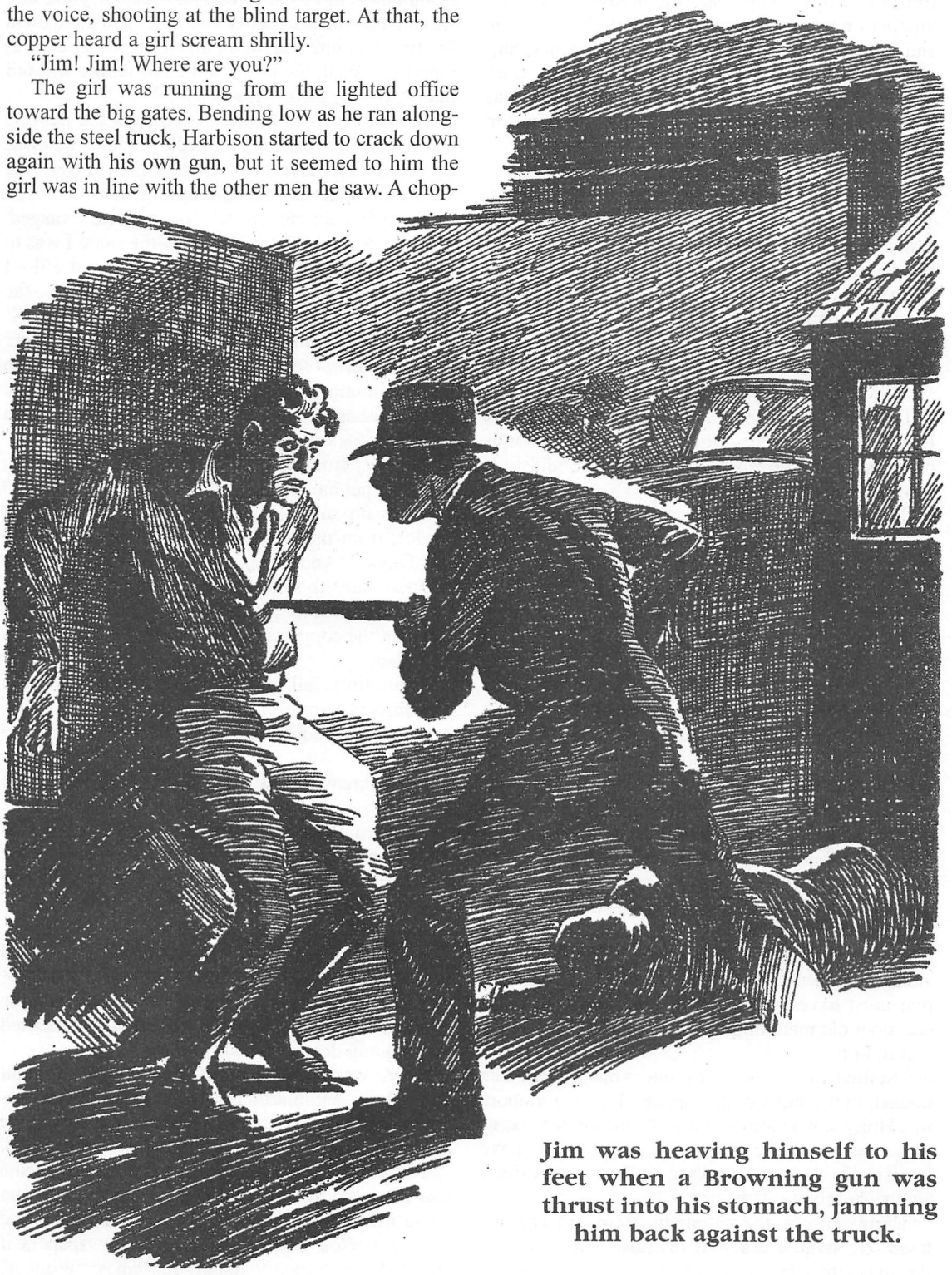
"Scram!" yelled one of the holdup men. "Drive through!"

Patrolman Harbison lunged in the direction of the voice, shooting at the blind target. At that, the copper heard a girl scream shrilly.

"Jim! Jim! Where are you?"

The girl was running from the lighted office toward the big gates. Bending low as he ran alongside the steel truck, Harbison started to crack down again with his own gun, but it seemed to him the girl was in line with the other men he saw. A chopper blazed so close slugs rang metallically from the truck's frame beside Harbison's head.

The copper dived, gripping the knees of a man he could just make out ahead. Then it must have



Jim was heaving himself to his feet when a Browning gun was thrust into his stomach, jamming him back against the truck.

seemed to Harbison that the truck itself had smashed down upon his head. He went limp, but clung to the man he had hit.

Two office men were following the girl, running from the office. They heard the holdup sedan spill thunder and saw it spurt dust as its lights came on and it whirled around the truck and the police car.

Neither of the office men proved heroic. Both ducked briefly for cover. When the holdup car was gone, they came out cautiously, one switching on bright lights over the gates.

"Look! Look at Rand—she's over there!"

One of the office men stammered the words. They could hear the sedan going away fast. They saw a uniformed copper lying on the ground, but his arms were locked around the knees of Jim Duval, the truck driver. Jim was down, a cut on his head and unable to rise.

"Miss Rand!" shouted one of the office men. "Jim? What are you doing?"

BARBARA RAND was bending over Jim Duval, white-faced. One of the girl's hands clutched half a dozen brown envelopes, and bills were spilling from one of these. The girl had just pulled the envelopes from Jim's coat pocket.

One of the office men heard the girl say, "Jim! Please, you didn't? You wouldn't?"

Harbison, the copper, was staggering to his feet. Though he had seen only a part of what had taken place, he said, "Give me that money, lady! You took it off this fellow you call Jim! The truck driver, huh? And that white paper, what is it?"

The paper was only a dirty scrap. A hasty scribble written in pencil showed on it. The copper swore under his breath and looked at the girl. Jim Duval was rubbing the back of a hand across his forehead.

"So you were in on it, smart guy?" rapped Harbison, his voice hard and bitter as he stared back at the body of Slim Rucker, his partner, lying in the street. "Your cut, huh? And you expected to get away with it? If it hadn't been for this young dame here, you'd have—"

"Please, officer!" interrupted Barbara Rand, in a strained voice. "It was only some pay envelopes that must have spilled out of the sack! Can't you see, poor old man Simpson, the watchman, is dead? Jim didn't—"

"Spilled out of the sack into your boyfriend's pocket, huh?" rapped the copper. "I've heard about this Unity Corporations' idea of trusting drivers, so there was no other way them mugs could have known this truck was pulling in here at this time! You stick around, lady, close!"

Harbison took the automatic from Jim Duval's hand. He swiped it across his nose, slapped open the magazine. He walked over and looked at the body of the old watchman, then back to the masked holdup he himself had shot.

Jim Duval appeared to be still dazed.

"You wouldn't know about this little note, huh?" demanded Harbison. "It says, 'this is your cut, Duval, and you had better lam out.' You gave them the tip-off, huh? Maybe bumped the watchman as your end? Well, the slugs in the old fellow will tell that. Anyway, there's Rucker—"

Harbison was pulling the mask off the man he had shot. This man was bleeding badly, but was conscious. His face held a sickly pallor. His eyes were pinpoints, and his chin trembled.

"I ain't goin' to croak!" he suddenly rasped. "Gimme a break! I didn't know—they said I was to meet a truck driver—gimme a break and I'll—I didn't do any killin', didn't have no rod even —the driver knows me, us bein' in stir together—he—"

It was unfortunate for Jim Duval that the dying man had no more evidence to offer, and that Jim was too honest to be cagey about what he said. Harbison had snapped a bracelet on his wrist. Jim bent over the dying man and spoke.

"Taylor, from up the river? Taylor, hell, you wouldn't put me on the spot? Can't you see what—"

Harbison said to "shut up." So this man was Taylor, from up the river? Then Harbison said to Jim Duval, "And he's already dead! So what he's told will have to stand!"

The fair-haired girl with the big brown eyes stared at the copper. Her face was pale, and her lips trembled.

"Jim! Jim! Tell him you made good five years ago on your parole!"

Jim Duval looked at the girl he had expected to marry.

"You knew about that, Barbara—the man I killed—"

The two office men were looking at Jim now as if they had never seen him. A paroled convict. One of the men said he saw Barbara Rand taking the money out of Jim Duval's pocket.

SIRENS screamed in the next street. Two squad cars were closely followed by a fast, gray roadster. The policemen poured out. Jim Duval looked at the coppers and his mouth tightened, but he ceased making any denials.

There was no doubt but that Jim was confident the sudden nightmare must be cleared up. It sometimes happens that an innocent man appears more guilty than one who is more versed in crookedness.

Barbara Rand was clinging to Jim's arm, but she was dry-eyed, pitiful. She looked at two men who came from the gray roadster. She would have had to be a person who never read the newspapers if she had not instantly identified James "Wildcat"

Gordon, commissioner of police. Or Dick Traeger, former police deputy, but now retired.

The pair were marked figures. Wildcat Gordon looked down at the face of the holdup man who was now dead. He said instantly, "Buck Taylor, out on his third parole. And Slim Rucker is dead. Take everyone here down to headquarters."

CHAPTER II
THE FIGHTING WILDCAT

JAMES WILDCAT GORDON, police commissioner, was the army's contribution to the city's department. He sat behind his wide desk with brilliant, yellow shoes erected. His present uniform—if such it could have been termed —was of loudly checkered pattern. He wore a red necktie and a scarlet carnation was in his coat lapel.

Wildcat Gordon looked from under a new army hat slanted over one almost colorless eye. His eyes were of the washed-out blue, or gray, that once marked law enforcement on the Texas border. Some would have said they were killer's eyes. Those who said this would have been correct.

Smoke threaded now from a stubby pipe clenched in Wildcat's teeth. He was looking at fair-haired Barbara Rand, with her innocent brown eyes and trembling lips. And at tall, husky Jim Duval, whose orbs at this moment were blue, and hard, and bitter. Jim's shoulders were squared as he faced the commissioner.

"Paroled ten years ago, pardoned for five, and some of the stir rats looked you up, is that it, Duval?" said Wildcat quietly.

Jim Duval was shaking his head stubbornly. Barbara Rand said, "No! No! Commissioner Gordon, you don't know Jim as I do or you wouldn't—"

"I haven't asked you any questions, Miss Rand!" rapped out Wildcat. "Five of my boys have been murdered in six weeks! Parole birds got four of them, and this tonight makes it six killings! They took bullets from Duval's gun out of the plant watchman. He had the rod in his hand, so—"

"I don't know a damned thing about that!" snapped Jim Duval. "If I'm being framed, let's get it over with! I was knocked out, and then I had the gun! Some of the money was in my pocket, and you have the dirty framers' note! I've never had any use for cops since they—"

"Sure! Sure!" interrupted Wildcat. "Parole birds never do! So you put the old watchman on the same list as the cops, and you beat your way out of a manslaughter rap up the river! Funny, Duval, but three of the parole birds who have done the killing here have been from down the river, from where you came! That isn't in our State, but this seems to be a soft spot for them to land!"

"Please, Commissioner Gordon," said Barbara Rand, "you have a reputation for getting at the truth! Can't you see this couldn't have been anything but a frame-up? Someone who knew about the payroll—"

"That's the point!" rasped Wildcat. "Somebody who knew! And who did? The time, the manner of delivery? Only Jim Duval and yourself? Right?"

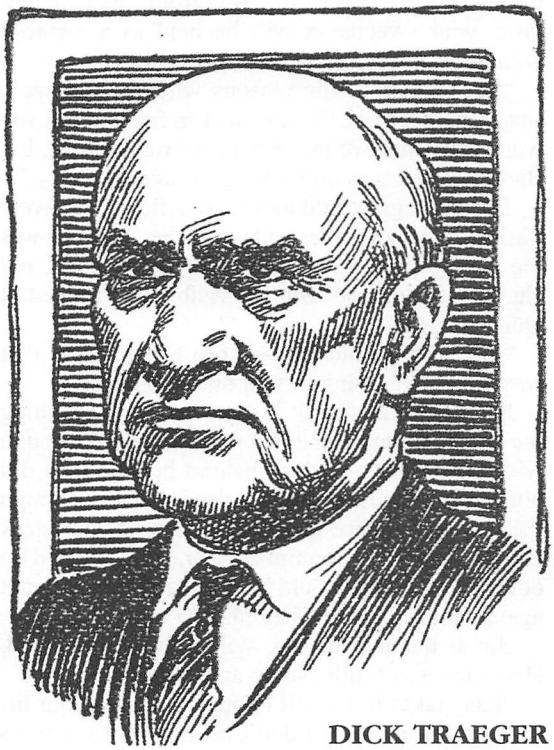
"Yes! Yes! But Jim didn't—he couldn't? You don't want the truth! You want only revenge for the killing of your policemen!"

Now old Dick Traeger had been retired as police deputy for several years. In his day he had been known as "Quick Trigger." He was the only other occupant of Wildcat's office at this moment. His head was bald and shiny, except for gray tufts over his ears. He seemed to be nearsighted, peering at the others from faded, tired eyes.

Old Quick Trigger spoke in an apologetic tone.

"Wildcat knows that your young man has been framed, Miss Rand," he said, rubbing fingers across his bald forehead. "I could see at once that the frame-up was too obvious. But I am afraid I have to plead guilty to suggestin' that this is one frame-up it might be as well to let go all the way."

Wildcat had a hard grin and said, "Shut up, Quick Trigger! All right, it appears to be a frame-up, Duval! That means that some of these crooks who know you have a reason for getting you out of the way! So, you're being put out of the way! In fact, you're going up the river again!"



DICK TRAEGER

JIM DUVAL reared to his feet, exploding with an oath. He would not go up the river, stand trial for a possible murder charge, lose the years he had gained. But Barbara Rand was reading something in Wildcat's colorless eyes.

Old Quick Trigger had his keen eyes fixed on the girl's face. She was a slight, little person, barely a hundred pounds, though the curves were in all the right places. Perhaps Quick Trigger was thinking of his own granddaughter, "Tiny" Traeger. She was small, and quick, and pretty, too.

Quick Trigger had been as good as a father to Wildcat Gordon. While Wildcat was an officer in the army, later when a police inspector, and now since Wildcat's amazing career as police commissioner. For years, Wildcat had kept his apartment in Quick Trigger's penthouse.

Quick Trigger must have been thinking this Barbara was twenty, and so was Tiny. That Barbara Rand was deeply in love with this somewhat sullen Jim Duval. And Quick Trigger also knew that this grandchild, Tiny, was head over heels in love with Wildcat Gordon.

Old Quick Trigger sighed as Wildcat announced that Jim Duval was "to go up the river again." He could see Barbara Rand moving slowly toward the office door.

Wildcat announced, "The tip-off on the payroll money will send you back to prison, Duval. But you will miss a murder rap, and I have an idea we could have your parole revived and have you taken back to the big house you came from. In the meantime, your sweetheart will be held as a material witness, if not for more."

"You're one of the reasons why I hate cops!" snapped Jim Duval. "You know I'm framed, and you won't give either of us a break! All right for me, but Barbara Rand was only trying to save me and—"

The slight girl could move like a flash —a lovely flash. with blazing eyes and quick feet. And she was moving toward the outer door. Wildcat did not change his position. But his visible eye flicked at Quick Trigger.

"You can't hold me—I can't help him that way—and I'm going to find out who the—"

It seemed that Quick Trigger was slow reaching the door. Barbara Rand had it open, darted through with Quick Trigger close behind her. Wildcat did not move. Jim Duval was poised tensely. Though the stocky, square-faced man behind the desk might be the police commissioner, there seemed no doubt but that Jim would have added another count against him if Wildcat had made a move.

But as the door closed, Wildcat's tone changed. His voice was brittle, sharp and informative.

"Easy takes it, Duval! I happen to want your little friend to get out! I don't need her as a witness against you! And because of a dusty road into the Unity Steel plant, you'll miss the murder rap!"

JIM DUVAL shook his head. He was still belligerent, but he was bewildered.

"You see, Duval, while the slugs from your gun were in the watchman, the gun had been in the dusty road. There were other fingerprints on it. And they were put there by the mug who put the bullets in the old man. He was killed by a rap over the head, anyway.

"I've an idea we may find the owner of those fingerprints, and in the meantime there have been some funny paroles over in the State you came from. That's why you're going back, and why your sweetheart will not be picked up even as a witness. I think she is a smart girl, with ideas."

Jim Duval's blue eyes lightened. He wanted to know if he was getting this straight; why permitting him to be framed back up the river would accomplish anything.

Wildcat Gordon told him quickly. Wildcat said that he might himself be framed for a stretch up the river in the other State.

"And I want it to be believed that the frame-up against you pulled the wool over the eyes of the police. Are you getting it?"

"You mean that I'm being used as bait to get at the killers behind this holdup, Commissioner Gordon?"

"Exactly!" rapped out Wildcat. "More than that, none but Quick Trigger and myself will know that your sentence isn't on the up and up! I am withholding for my own personal use the information about the slugs taken from the watchman's body. In fact, the ballistics expert will report by my order that they came from another gun."

Outside in the long corridor, Quick Trigger was moving more swiftly. He overtook Barbara Rand, caught her arm gently.

"I could not overtake you, understand?" said the old man. "But if you happen to call me personally at my penthouse tomorrow mornin', I may be able to tell you the name of a mug whose fingerprints were on Jim Duval's gun. But you must keep that as your own secret. Your young man must go up the river. It's tough right now, but if it rounds up a new kind of a murder gang—"

The girl blazed out at him. Her voice was chilled, and her eyes were doubtful. "I like you," she said, "but I shall always hate Wildcat Gordon. He has no right to use Jim to help that way—to ruin his character after he has cleared himself—even to catch murderers. If you trust me with a secret, I'll keep it, but I will not promise what I will do personally. I'll—"

"Softly, child," admonished Quick Trigger. "Barbara Rand?" he added musingly. "Twenty years

ago there was a young woman named Barbara Rand. But she was married to a man whose name was Hiley—"

For the first time fear, sudden cold terror whitened the girl's face.

"You know that? My mother? My father?"

"I was a policeman twenty years ago, Barbara Rand, an' I was called to testify against a man picked up here. His name was Hiley. He got twenty years to life for—"

"Oh, please—please!" the girl was pleading. "If that were known, it would hurt Jim! He doesn't know! I hoped he—"

"That he would never find out," supplied Quick Trigger. "Go home now, child, an' call me personally in the mornin'. And for your information, I never quite believed the man called Jack Hiley committed the murder of which he was convicted."

WHEN Quick Trigger returned to Wildcat's office, Wildcat glanced at him. He shook his bald head and looked solemn.

"I'm gettin' old, Wildcat. I could not catch up with the young woman. She got away, an' I was wonderin'—"

"You once were an honest copper, Quick Trigger," interrupted Wildcat, with a grin. "Jim Duval has gone back to the cells. There's a sheriff over the State line, and he will be picking up Duval in the morning on a revived parole charge of carrying a gun and suspicion of criminal intent. So—"

Trigger frowned and rubbed his finger across his bald spot.

"Wildcat, you're not goin' on another one of—"

"I've identified those fingerprints," stated Wildcat. "D. Smith, who can't talk much more than in a whisper, will be doing a little drinking and looking around in a few hot spots. I want to listen in on Crulls Yanna for a few nights. Crulls never was big stuff, so there's someone else who is playing a little-in-and-out game with paroles. I think—"

"If I only hadn't made that dental plate!" groaned Quick Trigger. "One of these times will be the last for The Whisperer."

D. Smith. The Whisperer!

Though he had solved numerous crimes, some with violence that set his own police on his trail, the supercrook known as The Whisperer was known definitely to only two persons: himself and old Quick Trigger.

So while Wildcat Gordon was preparing to vanish temporarily as commissioner and to assume a role that had come about by Quick Trigger's accidental construction of an odd dental plate, his own department was putting out extra details in an effort to round up the men responsible for the most recent holdup and killings.

Quick Trigger always opposed Wildcat's activities as The Whisperer. But in various disguises, which he was an adept in creating, Quick Trigger never was far from the weirdly whispering crook.

CHAPTER III
FRAMING OF MURDER

BARBARA RAND did not appear at her place in Unity Steel the following day. The case of Jim Duval headlined first pages of newspapers. There was editorial hue and cry to apprehend the killers who had recently been operating in the city.

Six murdered coppers. Heroes all! But why had not the fiery Wildcat Gordon acted effectively? Why had some of the parole killers been permitted to operate so freely in the big town?

These were the editorials. And as it usually happened when printer's ink started to smear the police department, Commissioner Gordon himself was strangely silent, and absent from his office most of the time.

The news stories squawked with extra loudness when it became known that the Unity Corporations office was demanding action on this latest holdup. Unity Corporations was B. F. Leffler, better known as "Big Fist" Leffler for the ruthless invasions he made into the realms of finance and industry.

Late afternoon stories reported that Jim Duval, arrested in the Unity Steel robbery and killings, had suddenly pleaded guilty to a charge that had caused him to be spirited directly back up the river, in the prison of a State from which he had been paroled long before. And this brought a directly personal messenger from Big Fist Leffler to the office of Wildcat Gordon.

Wildcat had not appeared since the night before. Acting in his place was a sour-faced, long-nosed man, Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton. In the office at the time also was Mayor Van Royston, a small, weak-chinned, but strutting little man who made up for a lack of size and strength by his sartorial elegance. Mayor Van Royston, elected on

the reform ticket, was one of the best-dressed party men the big town had ever had.

In Wildcat's office with Mayor Van Royston and Deputy Bolton was a man who was big of head, long of face, but as small of body as the mayor himself. He had the solemn, disapproving aspect of a man who looked as if he would have been a better Sunday-school teacher than a business man.

This appearance had given him the name of Deacon, "Deacon" Fram, of the immensely powerful Unity Corporations. Despite his sanctimonious appearance and attitude toward the world, Deacon Fram was confidential secretary to Big Fist Leffler. It was reported that Deacon Fram had been with Big Fist Leffler in the years before Leffler had become the head of the powerful industries.

Deacon Fram never seemed to lose his temper, beyond the point of a complaining attitude. He was in this frame of mind now.

"I tell you, Mayor Van Royston, that your police department must do something quickly about the crime that has come about from the doubtful granting of paroles," stated Deacon Fram, nodding his long head, a habit he had when talking. "Mr. Leffler himself demands action. Our employees are no longer safe. Every system we have been able to devise has failed to prevent payroll robberies. Now we find that one of our own truck drivers had been a paroled man. They never go straight."

Perhaps Mayor Van Royston did not quite agree with the last statement, but the mayor did not find it opportune to disagree with an opinion that came straight from Unity Corporations.

DEPUTY HENRY BOLTON

"Yes, yes, yes, Deacon Fram," he said, "it is deplorable. I have been trying to contact Commissioner Gordon all day. As soon as I reach him—"

"I was coming to that," said Deacon Fram. "When too many policemen have been killed without effective action, criminals imagine they have the upper hand. I regret to say that Mr. Leffler does not repose a great deal of faith in Commissioner Gordon, so—"

Deacon Fram joined his fingertips and inspected them thoughtfully. A side glance of agreement passed between Mayor Van Royston and Deputy Bolton. When Deacon Fram left the headquarters office it was nearly nightfall. And Deacon Fram carried with him the assurance that Mayor Van Royston himself would take some direct measures to speed up the still missing Wildcat Gordon.

IT was about this time that half a dozen men were drinking at a table in what Wildcat Gordon had referred to as one of the hot spots of the big town. A florid-faced, narrow-eyed man held the attention of the others. He spilled words from the corner of his mouth, at the same time crunching pretzels as he swigged down his beer.

When it was not pretzels, it was doughnuts. It was said that the piggish-faced "Crulls" Yanna carried his supplies in his pockets. This had given him his name. Now Crulls Yanna had never been a big timer among the denizens of the underworld, but recently he had seemed to come into a sudden leadership.

Beside Crulls sat a huge, humped man with light, hairy eyebrows. He was known as "Truck" Roman, mostly because of his size. One other of the six men appeared to be taking a prominent part in the growled conversation. This fellow had a pallor that was unmistakable.

There was no doubt but the man, nervous and jerky, and unhealthily pale, had not been exposed to sunshine for a long time. His head moved in furtive jerks, watchfully upon others of fifty or more men and women in the hot spot.

Crulls Yanna growled out, "You'll snake it short an' sweet, Lorton, an' don't leave any loose ends. The Unity Steel plant is all cased. We have the dump lined up, an' the dough's comin' along in a private car at ten o'clock. But get this, Lorton, there's Scarvason, the cashier, and he can't live to talk, see? He's the bait. If there's any coppers butt into this one, let 'em have it an' scram! You've got it?"

Yanna's words were not loud enough to reach a corner table nearby. A man of inconspicuous garb and face sat there, drinking straight rum. Occasionally, his long-chinned face dropped to his hands. Then he would glance around quickly, as if

he did not wish anyone to discover he had almost dropped to sleep over his glass.

The man wore gray clothes; gray shoes with cloth tops. His hat was round-brimmed and blurry, whitish-gray hair stuck around it.

The lone drinker's eyes seemed to have no color. None in the hot spot would have imagined he could read the lips of those at Crulls Yanna's table. But he had missed no word.

THE pallid man addressed as Lorton shifted his head nervously. His nostrils twitched. He transferred a small bit of whitish powder from the back of his hand. Then he straightened and seemed to have steadied himself.

"That's the ticket, an' you can take it on the lam with a nice cut on the job," said Truck Roman, echoing Yanna. "You fellows from up the river have all the luck on these pushovers. The Black Hood asks only that one job in exchange for your parole. You understand that?"

The pale Lorton said, "Sure! Sure! I ain't sayin' nothin' against bumpin' this fella Scarvason, the cashier! But I ain't no cop killer! I don't want to mix up—"

"The Black Hood ain't interested in your ideas about cops, Lorton!" interrupted Yanna. "You got your ticket from stir, an' that says you pull triggers on this job! There was another mug who got paralysis in his finger on account of a cop on one of the other jobs, so they put him on a slab alongside the cop! You get it, Lorton?"

The man called Lorton nodded and mumbled. He sniffed some more powder.

The little gray man, the most humble drinker in the hot spot, spilled some of his brandy and wiped it up hastily. Another man with a black beard and a long nose was sitting at another table. This man spilled some beer, arose and went out muttering.

The wall clock showed past nine o'clock.

Yanna said, "You'll have the chopper, Lorton! Cover us when the car rolls up with the dough! You get Scarvason, the cashier, first when he opens the door! He coughed to the Black Hood an' wants his split ! But he ain't safe, see?"

Lorton said, "He gets it, but the way I was told, he's only bein' framed like this other punk, Jim Duval, the news rags are yellin' about."

"Don't get to knowin' too damned much!" rapped Yanna. "It ain't so healthy!"

The six men were scuffling their feet, getting up from the table. Crulls Yanna crammed a pretzel into his wide mouth, and grunted, "Well, get goin'!"

Lorton gave the hot spot one more furtive once-over. It was plain enough that the sight of a man with big, flat feet at this minute would have shaken his nerve. But the bearded man who had spilled his beer and walked out at a signal from the man in gray did not have flat feet.

Nor did the man in gray, with his oddly shaped, long chin and his inoffensive appearance. And at this moment, the man in gray had apparently succumbed to too much brandy and dropped his head on the table. He had none of the setup of a cop, either.

The little gray man moved his lips slightly. A drunken, whispering snore was the only sound.

A whispering snore. It was well for the pallid Lorton's peace of mind that he had no means of knowing that the man in gray was The Whisperer himself.

The uncanny, unidentified Whisperer! The supercrook who nearly always struck in the darkness! The Whisperer, who the few times lie had been trapped, had managed to exterminate those who had made him prisoner! The most feared figure in the underworld, and yet one whose violence had at times been directed to bringing some reward to lesser crooks who had aided him.

The Whisperer remained motionless as Crulls Yanna and the five others slouched from the hot spot into a foggy side street near the waterfront. Queerly enough, The Whisperer was not at this moment watching Yanna and his men.

For a rather plump girl had arisen from still another table. Her hair was a glossy, shiny black. Her face was attractive, or it would have been had not her cheeks appeared to be too plump. Perhaps it was something in the plump cheeks, the heavy appearance of the young woman that drew The Whisperer's eyes.

Or it might have been that the girl seemed to have been drinking too much, and her progress was awkward. But which of these it may have been, The Whisperer let out a hissing chuckle. Then he whispered words.

"Perhaps Quick Trigger's idea was good to put her onto the fingerprints of Crulls Yanna being on that death gun, but she's got a nice little gun in that hand bag, and maybe she'll ball up the works."

THE gray Whisperer permitted the girl to pass into the street before he moved. Then he came groggily to his feet. At this, what had looked like a black bundle of fur moved from under the table. Snapping black eyes were sparkling.

The black bundle was a Scottish terrier. The dog's upper lip drew back and showed vicious, sharp fangs. He whimpered a little.

"Quiet, Brian Boru!" commanded The Whisperer's voice. "You'll be having your chance at a mouthful of poisoned meat!"

The black terrier was at The Whisperer's heels as he emerged from the hot spot. A black sedan was pulling away from the opposite curb. It was easy to make out the figure of Crulls Yanna. There was a

driver, making seven men in the car.

The Whisperer saw the girl walking close to the buildings. A ghostly chuckle was emitted. She was still the plump figure of a young woman. But her plump curves had slipped some in the wrong places. The first street lamp showed the girl's face, and the skin was very dark. But there was a light, quick movement about her that did not go with her size.

The Whisperer saw her cross the street quickly. A little car emerged from the mouth of an alley, and she was at the wheel. The plump, black-haired girl was closely tailing the Crulls Yanna crowd. Too closely, and it brought a brief oath.

"Hallamighty!" said The Whisperer.

But it was more than the girl's apparent shadowing of the other car that drew forth the profane outburst. For as it passed the street lamp, the girl's face had disappeared. Her head was enveloped in a black hood.

Had the girl been reading the mobsters' lips the same as The Whisperer, or had she some other medium of knowing where the murder holdup gang was going?

The Whisperer had been too long in the police game to be surprised at what might have been the most fantastic development. He had been aware from the first that the plump, black-haired girl was none other than the slight, fair-haired Barbara Rand. And he had imagined that it was her knowledge of Crulls Yanna's fingerprints that had brought her to the hot spot.

For this was one of the most unsavory of the underworld neighborhoods. A girl of the class of Barbara Rand surely would not have been frequenting such a place. But Yanna had told Lorton, the paroled triggerman for the planned holdup, that everything was being done by the order of the "Black Hood."

The Whisperer was only a part of the gray fog as he moved swiftly into an alley. Old Quick Trigger sat in one of their fast coupés, with the motor running. Quick Trigger was the bearded man who had seemed to be drunk. Disguises had become a hobby with the ex-deputy since he had retired from the force.

It was by Quick Trigger's own oft-regretted suggestion and help that Wildcat Gordon had adopted a "crook" disguise to break tough cases. He had made an oddly shaped dental plate. This accomplished a complete change in the contour of Wildcat's face. It gave him a long chin, a long upper lip and drew in his cheeks. A bit of wax for the nose and a white powder for the naturally rusty-red hair made altogether another man of Wildcat.

Wildcat's mannerisms and dress as commissioner were cleverly assumed. When he seemed to display the worst possible taste in clothes as commissioner, being a loud, gaudy, conspicuous figure, as The Whisperer he adopted the all-gray attire.

The whispering voice had been an accident caused by the dental plate muffling his naturally cutting voice. It might have been changed, but the whisper itself became notable for the terror it struck in the underworld.

THE WHISPERER sprang into the coupé beside Quick Trigger.

"We have something new on hand, and it's bad," said The Whisperer. "You were so sure Barbara Rand could and would help lead us to the brains behind these cop-killing holdups that you put too much faith in her. Back in the hot spot Crulls Yanna said all were taking orders from the Black Hood."

"I reckon we ain't doin' so good," mumbled Quick Trigger. "I saw her as she trailed Yanna's sedan in her car. She pulled a black hood over her head in the alley. But maybe she heard Yanna, too, an' thought it would be a good idea."

"So she had a black hood all ready and waiting when she came out!" snapped Wildcat. "Roll, Quick Trigger! They're out for the Unity Steel payroll at ten o'clock, and that's four miles up the river! I want to take the short streets and meet them on the steep hill below the plant! How about the Browning?"

Quick Trigger was shooting the coupé through the foggy street. He reached back and pulled a wicked-looking, short-barreled machine gun from above the seat.

"Are we tryin' to take them in, Wildcat?" said Quick Trigger.

"I'm taking one man in, but not to headquarters," said The Whisperer. "He would be no good there, anyway, for he will be very dead. You remember a Joe Lorton being paroled from up the river last week? I happened to check on his record, and Joe Lorton has been sentenced to a total of thirty years, all in the past five years. Twice for killings. At a minimum of his total sentences he would still be in stir for another eighteen years."

Quick Trigger whistled through his teeth. Wildcat added the Black Hood must have considerable influence, if he had been having men paroled on the promise of giving them a holdup job, a cut and a chance to lam.

"That doesn't make sense, Wildcat," said the older man.

"Most parole boards don't, and this one especially!" said The Whisperer. "So Joe Lorton will neither get a cut nor do any killing tonight or any other time!"

Old Quick Trigger immediately became apprehensive.

"But you can't go around playin' executioner to some mug who hasn't committed a crime since he's been paroled," argued Quick Trigger. "This is one job we should lay off of until somethin' happens."

"You gave your own answer," said The

Whisperer, in his huskily calm voice. "From now on we are not laying off until something happens."

"You don't mean—"

"Turn at the top of the next hill and start down, Quick Trigger. Take it slow. We are minutes ahead of Yanna's car, and he will be hanging back to reach the Unity Steel plant at ten o'clock. I can spot the sedan, and we'll swing down the hill and block the highway."

Old Quick Trigger groaned. He eyed the hands of The Whisperer as he fingered the drum on the ugly machine gun. Brian Boru, the vicious black terrier, snarled at The Whisperer's feet. The dog had but one friend. He especially liked to get into a fight with the prospect of sinking his fangs into some of the "poisoned meat" The Whisperer had mentioned.

THE Unity Steel plant was one of the many divisions of Unity Corporations. As their coupé hit the top of the long, steep hill, The Whisperer was doing some rapid thinking. This would be the fourth payroll robbery involving the Unity Corporations.

Yet there had been every provision made to change time and manner of deliveries on payrolls. Where was the leak? Clearly enough Jim Duval had been framed, yet when The Whisperer thought of the plot he had just heard to kill a cashier named Scarvason, he wondered if it might be possible the young truck driver had slipped.

And if he had not, had the innocent face, the devotion of Barbara Rand fooled even old Quick Trigger's astute brain? The Whisperer did not want to believe either possibility.

But he had seen Barbara Rand trailing Crulls Yanna, and she had hastily donned a black hood. And the girl was—or had been—an assistant cashier at another plant. From newspaper stories, The Whisperer knew the Unity Corporations was demanding action.

That would mean Big Fist Leffler and his confidential secretary, Deacon Fram. The Whisperer chuckled. Leffler and Fram carried great weight with Mayor Van Royston. They were amply justified in doubting the wisdom of the policy taken with Jim Duval and Barbara.

There was one other dubious point of view: they had known that Barbara Rand was the daughter of none other than Jack Hiley, now serving a twenty-to-life sentence for a murder. The Whisperer could not dodge one police truth: that too often the descendants of criminals had the taint in their blood.

But this jumble of thinking flashed into the background suddenly. The coupé was parked at the top of the steep hill leading up to the Unity Steel plant. A long, black sedan had turned in at the bottom of the hill. And following it, a pair of twin lights showed abruptly, keeping some distance back in the fog.

CHAPTER IV
BULLETS JUST AHEAD

"IT don't make sense," grunted old Quick Trigger. "But maybe the child is the Black Hood. Crulls Yanna is too smart to have missed that bus trailin' him."

The Whisperer husked out a "Damn all dames! If she isn't the Black Hood, she is sure asking for it! And that hill's about the place the Yanna crowd will start something! Roll it, Quick Trigger!"

The ex-deputy rolled the coupé, sending it into the long, steep grade of the highway. And at that instant, Crulls Yanna's sedan swung around. Its length fairly blocked the two-track highway, one which carried only industrial traffic and little at this hour of the night.

But the car, apparently that of Barbara Rand, increased its speed. Was the sedan waiting for the girl to come up?

The Whisperer's coupé carried no lights. It was only a vague shadow as it plunged down the hill, speeding up as motor and gravity carried its speedometer to sixty, then seventy miles an hour. The Whisperer jammed the short machine gun through a metal slot in the windshield.

"Sometime we'll make our last mistake," murmured Quick Trigger. "Damn, they're goin' to crash!"

But the first crash was that of a gun. The chopper in The Whisperer's hands racketed into flaming staccato. Perhaps its raining slugs played a harmless tattoo upon the armored sides of the mob car. But they were plenty of warning that hell itself was on the way down the grade.

Then Quick Trigger was forced to swerve. He twisted the steering wheel. The coupé jumped the ditch, ran along a ridge of earth and threw off any chance The Whisperer had of chopping the would-be killers from their armored refuge.

The Whisperer swore, bucked open the door and rolled out, taking the machine gun along. He bounced into the ditch and rolled out. Two or more guns spewed lead, plowing into the ground around him.

The girl's car behind the blocking sedan came straight up the hill. The Whisperer saw through the dirt in his eyes two or three figures spring from the mob cars. These flattened in the highway.

The Whisperer could spot only the flashes of their guns. Slugs were pounding so close, he could not determine the direction of any weapon.

Metal ground into metal. The girl's coupé side-slipped, then turned over in the ditch. Then Crulls Yanna himself rocketed into the highway. He let out a warning yell.

"Hold it, you dumb eggs! It's the Black Hood!"

The girl's figure was outlined momentarily. Then The Whisperer saw big Truck Roman clump outside near his boss. The Whisperer could have

finished off either one. That was not in his mind. As a copper, he was not a man to kill what might prove to be a promising lead to the real brain, in this instance the Black Hood.

The girl's figure was hooded. She was walking straight toward the men inside and outside the sedan. There was the gleam of a weapon, a small pistol held steadily before her. Perhaps she was peering through the holes in the Black Hood, trying to make out friend or enemy in the darkness.

The Whisperer was holding his fire at that moment. He was not so sure himself just who was a friend or a foe, but he had a fixed idea. It was neither Yanna nor Truck Roman he had come there to blot out.

Quick Trigger's coupé was jammed into a wire fence above the road ditch. The small car had been sprayed with some of the bullets. The Whisperer swore savagely when Quick Trigger did not appear. He was convinced that the ex-deputy was wounded or knocked out. Otherwise, one of his ready police revolvers would have been roaring.

THEN one more man revealed himself in the sedan's headlights. He was Joe Lorton, with the prison pallor still on his face. The parole bird was carrying a chopper across one arm, and he was heading for a point where he could blast the coupé still carrying Quick Trigger.

The parolee never fired that blast. Nor would he ever kill another man.

There was an interval when no gun was blasting. That suspense which sometimes comes in the midst of a gun battle. And into this came an eerie, penetrating whisper. No more than that, but the shock of lightning could not have been greater.

"Stand where you are, Joe Lorton! You have beaten the chair! But none has ever beaten The Whisperer!"

"Great catfish, boys!" yelled Crulls Yanna. "Down, flat! The Whisperer!"

"The Whisperer?" squealed Joe Lorton's voice uncertainly. "Why, I'll let him have—"

His chopper snapped around, but it was not fired. Slugs screamed from the concrete. The stream lifted. Joe Lorton's throat turned to a bloody gap that could not support his head. There was no scream, for the parole bird's vocal cords had been ripped away. His head bobbed queerly forward, chin slapping into the blood streaming down his breast.

Doors in the sedan were slamming as Joe Lorton, who had started out to pay for his parole with a holdup killing, went humping forward into the ditch. The Whisperer rolled as the headlights of the sedan turned toward him. He started climbing the bank to Quick Trigger's coupé.

Then a single pistol cracked sharply three times. This was one time when The Whis-perer could see the gunner who was seeking him out. The still black-hooded girl was caught by the sedan's headlights. Perhaps The Whisperer would not have used his machine gun if he had been given the chance.

The opportunity was denied him. He felt as if a searing iron had been thrust through his round-brimmed hat. The Whisperer somersaulted back into the ditch, fully aware it had been the girl who had fired the slugs. But many minutes passed before his tough skull released its pressure on his brain and consciousness returned.

First, there was the jammed coupé of Quick Trigger's at the top of the bank. Then The Whisperer reached out in the darkness and touched liquid that was cold. Its stickiness proved that it was blood. A flashlight came on and revealed the ghastly, dead face of Joe Lorton the parolee.

The mob sedan was gone. The girl's coupé lay where it had been overturned. The Whisperer scrambled quickly up the bank to his own coupé. He swore in husky whispers as his light showed blood on the running board.

Old Quick Trigger's police revolver lay beside the coupé. The soft earth showed where the ex-deputy must have been dragged down the bank and loaded into the sedan.

NO grimmer face had ever been worn by a man than that of The Whisperer as he backed his coupé from the wire fence and slid it across the ditch to the highway. It was plain enough that Quick Trigger must be in the hands of Crulls Yanna and his men. They had left Joe Lorton where he had died.

It would not have been a good idea to carry back to town the body of the sniffing parole bird who had been elected to commit a murder and failed.

The Whisperer wasted several minutes searching the vicinity. But there was no other evidence but that Barbara Rand had been taken away by the gang.

A siren sounded up the highway. The single light

of a motorcycle came into view. The Whisperer opened his car's rumble seat and stuffed Joe Lorton's bloody body into the space. Before the motorcycle patrolman reached the hill, the coupé was shooting swiftly away, with its lights turned off.

The Whisperer's first thought now was for old Quick Trigger. Then he recalled another strange item. Brian Boru, the Scottish terrier, had disappeared.

The Whisperer ran over in his mind the hideouts that Crulls Yanna and his men might have sought. He was convinced they would not return to the hot spot from which they had been followed.

In this The Whisperer was correct. But the word had passed out. Underworld grapevine carried it to the police.

The late night extras came out with it:

THE WHISPERER STRIKES AGAIN!

The way it was written, Crulls Yanna had been out for a pleasure ride. The Whisperer had appeared. One of his party, a paroled man, had been murdered. No reason could be supplied.

There was no mention of the Black Hood. The Whisperer wondered what had happened. If Crulls had been there he could have explained. They hadn't stopped. As soon as Lorton had been killed, they had gone. It was the Black Hood's tough luck if he or she should get bumped off by The Whisperer. They had gone while the going was good.

The Whisperer swore. Was the girl the Black Hood? Time alone would tell.

CHAPTER V
BRIAN BORU'S FRIEND

WHILE the startling news of the reappearance of The Whisperer was striking consternation at police headquarters, The Whisperer was driving into one of the least desirable sections of the big town. While he was more worried over the whereabouts of Quick Trigger, he was more puzzled over the vanishing of Boru, the black terrier.

Never before had the faithful, vicious dog deserted him in a pinch. The Whisperer doubted if the animal could have been taken alive by Yanna and his men. Boru could make too fast use of his slashing fangs.

In a neighborhood where none asked questions of a stranger, The Whisperer drove his coupé into an alleyway. Two minutes later, he was ascending a back stairs with a wrapped body in his iron arms. An old man poked his head from a doorway. He saw the man he and others in the miserable tenement knew only as D. Smith, the man in gray.

The old man might have suspected this D. Smith was bringing home a body. But if he had been carrying a coffin, the old landlord would have only shut his door more quickly. Perhaps he wondered a short time later what D. Smith might be hammering together in his upstairs room. But that he would never ask, and he never would know.

In the meantime, old Quick Trigger had fallen at the first blast of bullets on the highway. There were many scars where the ex-deputy had taken slugs. This would be but one more. It was a slug in one shoulder. But the impact stunned him. He heard The Whisperer's shooting, then everything went black.

Suddenly, Quick Trigger awakened to cool silence. A rough tongue was licking his face. It was Boru. Stranger than this, a white hand was caressing Boru's head as if he was some family pet. This was incredible.

Then a soft voice spoke through a thickness of black cloth.

"Can you walk, do you think? I have bandaged your wound."

QUICK TRIGGER identified the voice of Barbara Rand. He sat up and saw he was in a field some distance from the highway. He was still disguised by his black beard, a waxed nose and a wig. He in no way resembled the Quick Trigger who had named Crulls Yanna as the man who must have killed the watchman at one of the Unity Corporations' plants.

Quick Trigger mumbled, "I guess I'm O.K. Where are we? How did I come here?"

"The dog whined, and I went to you. You were in a car near where there was some shooting. I guessed you were a farmer, and I saw you were hurt. So I carried you down the bank and across to this field."

"Farmer?" snorted Quick Trigger, then he decided it would be best to maintain his role for the time. Perhaps he could discover something more of the reason for the girl wearing the black hood.

"Carried me?" he grunted, muffling his voice. "You couldn't do it."

"I didn't think I could, but I was afraid some of those terrible men might kill you. I was coming along the highway and ran into the trouble by accident."

Quick Trigger grew doubtful. Barbara Rand was lying to him. But perhaps she did not wish to reveal her identity or tell of her connection with the Yanna sedan.

"My coupé, where you found me?" he said.

"There was a man in the ditch who tried to kill me," said the girl. "I had to shoot him. But I didn't kill him, and I was glad of that. He crawled out and took your car. Then he put a body of one of the men who was shot into it and drove away. just then a motorcycle cop came along, so I kept quiet."

It was confusing, difficult to establish how much of the truth Barbara Rand was telling. But suddenly the girl said, "There is a bus line over the hill. You can walk there. I am sorry, but I cannot go with you."

"But wait—"

He did not finish. The black-hooded girl was gone like a wisp of fog.

Old Quick Trigger chuckled humorously. He could see a bus approaching and he made for it across the field. Barbara Rand had not identified him as her friend, the man who had informed her of Crulls Yanna's connection with the payroll murders.

She had been requested to keep the secret of the fingerprints on the death gun. Well, if she had thought him a stranger, she had maintained her secrecy.

But Quick Trigger's chuckle was for more than that. Boru, the usually faithful terrier that cared for no person but The Whisperer, was streaking across the field after the girl under the black hood. Had the dog instinctively become her friend? Boru's instinct seldom failed him.

But the Scottish terrier followed the girl only a short distance. Then he pointed his nose for the city lights and cut diagonally across the fields. The dog was headed for home, for the latest miserable hideout of his master.

And up at the Unity Steel plant, cashier Scarvason received a heavy payroll sack brought by an employee in a private car.

"Fine night," said cashier Scarvason to the messenger. "I guess that after last night, the holdup gang will be a long time tackling another of the Unity payrolls."

Whereupon Scarvason concealed the payroll money and locked up for the night. He did not know that the wings of the death angel had brushed their shadow across him that night, but had not descended.

PERHAPS half an hour was required to bring Boru trotting along a narrow tenement street to The Whisperer's hideout. The dog was making for the front door of the squalid brick building. But, suddenly, the terrier halted and froze as stiffly as a pointer on the scent of game.

A uniformed patrolman had paused near the alley. There was a scuffling sound back there. The Whisperer was descending to his coupé, intent upon two objectives: one was getting upon the trail of Quick Trigger as quickly as possible. The second was to get rid of the body of Joe Lorton.

"Hold on there, you!" rapped out the patrolman, starting into the alley. "What goes on here?"

Because his was a tough beat and sudden fatality sometimes met coppers who barged into dark alleys, the patrolman slipped his holster catch and swung his gun into his hand. No reply came to the command to halt. A box thudded against metal. The copper plunged forward on his toes.

The starter of a car ground, but the motor did not catch. At that, the copper let go with a shot that zinged off the top of the car in the darkness. Still the motor did not catch. A few pedestrians ducked for cover. If there was to be shooting, by no means did they want to be witnesses.

The Whisperer was on a spot. Never had his own policemen suspected that the notorious crook suspect was none other than Wildcat Gordon, their commissioner.

This placed The Whisperer at a disadvantage. He could neither defend himself with one of his guns, nor could he permit his identity to be discovered.

The car had not started and the copper shouted and whammed away again with his gun. He had dimly observed that some one in this dubious neighborhood was loading a heavy object into the open rumble seat of the car.

For his next shot, the copper sighted carefully through the open window where a head was vaguely outlined. He fired, but the bullet screamed off a high brick wall and the patrolman yelled a startled oath of pain.

A flying bundle of fur with glittering eyes and a killing snarl hit the copper's legs. Flashing fangs ripped the blue uniform and set themselves in a husky leg.

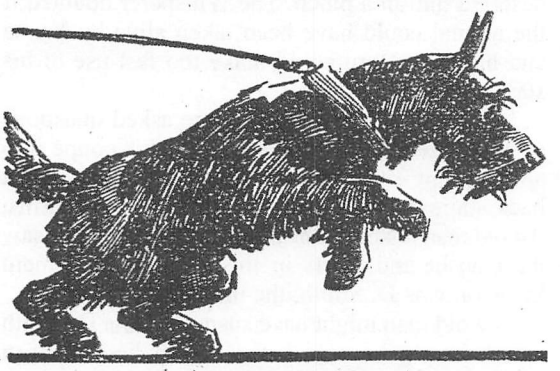
The patrolman stumbled and went down on his face. The black dog made a lightning shift of his hold. He dived for the copper's throat, fangs set for a killing slash.

A weird, penetrating whisper, like the sudden blowing of a ghostly wind, filled the alley.

"Back, Brian Boru! Drop him! Here, boy!"

It was a toss-up which chilled the copper the most, the unexpected attack of the terrier or the startling command of the whisper in the alley. For the icy voice of The Whisperer was a tradition in the department. Those who had heard it had attempted to reproduce it for others. The copper was in no doubt but that be had walked into the jaws of death.

The patrolman scrambled, groping for the revolver that had fallen from his hand. But before he had it, the terrier had streaked to the car, made a flying leap and the coupé was shooting out of



BRIAN BORU

the alley at the other end.

The wreck of an old man who was the landlord could tell nothing. That is, nothing that was of any help. He mumbled. A man named Smithers or something like that had rented the room which The Whisperer had occupied. This was a respectable rooming house. The copper knew it was useless to pull the landlord down to headquarters.

The copper also knew the tenement building was a miracle in this neighborhood if it did not house one or more killers. There was a dark stain of blood on the filthy floor of a room with one chair and a table. Some nails and a hammer lay on the floor.

"TINY" TRAEGER

THE patrolman shortly afterward added his report of The Whisperer to the seething situation at headquarters. This brought Mayor Van Royston to the office to confer with Deputy Henry Bolton. The telephone rang. The voice on the phone was that of Big Fist Leffler himself. He usually talked in a roaring tone.

But his voice was subdued now, almost as if he were trying to suppress some secret.

"In Heaven's name, Mayor Van Royston!" exploded Big Fist. "I hear The Whisperer has become mixed up in the payroll robberies! I want to see and talk with Wildcat Gordon in person, understand? This parole outbreak is a direct threat—well, if there's one man paroled from that prison up the river my life is not worth a dime!"

None before this had ever heard Big Fist's voice tremble. But it had become almost abject. Mayor Van Royston was astounded.

"I'll have Wildcat Gordon see you the first thing in the morning, Mr. Leffler."

"But I must see him now—right now!" pleaded Big Fist. "I'll have Deacon Fram come down to headquarters to pick him up!"

"But Wildcat Gordon is miss—"

"Your mistake, Mayor Van Royston," spoke the quiet, mocking voice of Wildcat from the doorway of his office. "I've been listening. Tell Big Fist Leffler I'll be at his office in the Unity Corporations building in half an hour.

"Deputy Bolton, I want you to get down into DeLancey Street and see if you can pick up the trail of The Whisperer there. I can't go for a little ride in the country without my cops letting The Whisperer make monkeys of them."

Deputy Henry Bolton's small eyes glared at the commissioner. For more than a year, he had been attempting to trap The Whisperer. During that same period he had also been making a strong play for Wildcat's job. Neither ambition had succeeded.

Five minutes later, the elusive Wildcat, having walked out on a string of orders from Mayor Van Royston, was buzzing Quick Trigger's penthouse. A musical voice with a tang of spunk in it replied.

"Yes, Quick Trigger is here! He is drinking the coffee I've been keeping hot for you all night! If you don't come home at all, it will be too soon! I won't wait up!"

That was Tiny Traeger, and Wildcat grinned. Tiny's eyes were a dark blue, like the sky in front of a thunderstorm. Her hair was short and curly and black. Wildcat knew she would be waiting up with hot coffee whether he came home tonight or some time the next week.

WILDCAT went up in a night elevator to the tenth floor of the Unity Corporations building half an hour later. Big Fist Leffler was nearly sixty and looked forty-five. His face was big and scarred, and his forehead and chin had equal bulges. But tonight there was a showing of red veins in his eyes.

Deacon Fram had arrived. He looked sleepy, his mouth was pursed, and his long head was nodding. He touched his fingertips together and apparently did not greatly favor the calling of the flamboyant commissioner.

Wildcat surveyed both men, the financial giant, Big Fist, and his longtime secretary without expression in his own colorless eyes.

"This parole business, Commissioner Gordon, is clearly getting out of hand with your police," said Deacon Fram. "I wouldn't go so far as to say the board up the river is being influenced, but there have been too many parole crimes lately."

"That's it, damn it!" boomed Big Fist Leffler. "None of the killers should be turned loose! If it comes to one man who still has several years to serve before he is eligible for parole, I will be forced to appeal to you, Commissioner Gordon, to

protect my life! And I suspect I have made some recent enemies who might be able to get their own way with the parole board! What would you advise?"

"Go home and go to sleep," said Wildcat calmly, flicking the red carnation in his buttonhole. "That's what I intend to do. Perhaps the parole board over the line may have reason to tighten up on some of its leniency."

"That was about all I expected from you, Commissioner Gordon," said Deacon Fram unpleasantly. "Has it ever occurred to you that a man of the importance of Mr. Leffler might find it convenient to have another commissioner who would realize the value of his life?"

"That has occurred to me," said Wildcat, with a grin. He stuffed tobacco in his pipe and blew an odorous cloud of smoke. "It is too bad that a man of Mr. Leffler's standing cannot obtain some influence himself with a parole board."

"We can do nothing in a State where we have no interests," said Big Fist heavily. "I don't know even the names of the parole board members."

CHAPTER VI
A PAROLE BIRD RETURNS

QUICK TRIGGER squinted his eyes at Wildcat Gordon a short time after the unsatisfactory interview with Big Fist Leffler and Deacon Fram.

"We ain't doin' so good, Wildcat," complained the older man. "You didn't ask Big Fist Leffler which killer up the river he fears."

"I didn't ask him," stated Wildcat. "I know. It would be Jack Hiley, the father of Barbara Rand. So when the innocent Miss Rand shows up in a black hood and is able to walk away from Crulls Yanna and his mobsters, it is a strange coincidence."

"What?" snapped the doll-like Tiny Traeger. "You don't mean to tell me there is actually a pretty woman living that you haven't fallen for, Wildcat? Take your yellow shoes off my kitchen table, drink your coffee, and maybe you'll become more normal!"

Wildcat said, "What would a school girl like you know about a man's preference for pretty women? Someday I'll have—"

But he was talking to a door that had slammed. Tiny had fire in her eyes. Would the hard-boiled Wildcat ever learn that she had grown up? And when a man stalled about preference for any pretty woman, Tiny thought she knew the answer. Well, she would look up this Miss Barbara Rand.

Quick Trigger said, "So that's the angle you're takin', Wildcat? You think Barbara Rand worked her way into Big Fist Leffler's corporations with an idea of helpin' avenge her father, so she could be none other but the Black Hood?"

"Something may develop, Quick Trigger, that may put Barbara Rand on the spot," said Wildcat. "I have several visits to make early today, so it might be well to scout around and see if the good-looking dame is attending to her business with the Unity."

Even Quick Trigger would have been amazed at one visit the grinning Wildcat intended making during the afternoon of this same day.

But Quick Trigger was to get a surprise of his own. For it was about noon, when he learned that the enigmatic Barbara Rand had really returned to her job at the Unity Steel plant of the Unity Corporations. And more strangely, the order for her to resume her position came directly from Big Fist Leffler himself. Big Fist, who feared for his life, who looked over his reckless past and was convinced that only the gray walls of the State prison up the river separated him from death.

SEVERAL cars passed through the high, iron gates of the downriver prison in the other State shortly after the noon hour. The few prisoners being given exercise in the big yard stared at these cars with interest.

Narrow, cold eyes became harder. In a few there was faint hope, but in the eyes of only one was there a gleaming sureness. For one man walked with the other cons in the yard, certain that in a short time he would be summoned to the parole-board room in the gray administration building.

This one man was called "Lug" Slanton. Except for one thing, he would have had another eight years to serve before he was eligible to appeal for parole. That one thing was a grapevine message that had filtered through the steel cell blocks and reached Lug Slanton.

Lug Slanton, a three-time loser and up twice for second-degree murders that had only missed rating the chair because of the best paid of crook mouthpieces. And the word had come to Lug Slanton that a mysterious figure known as the Black Hood had selected him for special parole.

Lug Slanton's twisted mouth twitched. He had, with difficulty, restrained himself from passing his good news along. But the Black Hood did not favor those who talked. So Lug Slanton could only twist his mouth some more as a tall, solemn lawyer assisted a gray-haired, bent woman from one of the cars.

"My mother!" grated Lug Slanton to himself. "But who's that other egg in the station car?"

The "other egg" was a humble, retiring man who had come up from the railroad station in the regular prison wagon. He glanced at the cons in the yard as if he feared them a little, and would just as soon have been in some other spot.

There were several other men arriving in cars. These were the seven members of the parole board,

and the usual quota of persons who hoped to make special pleas.

The humble man was dressed all in gray. His upper lip was long and his chin oddly pointed. He had a scarf wrapped tightly around his throat. When he spoke to the guard, asking direction to the parole board room, he said hoarsely that he was suffering from a severe cold.

The guard nodded. Then he passed his hands over the man's gray clothes. He would have had to be more of an expert to have discovered the flat and queerly silenced weapons the man was bearing. For this was a visit of which Wildcat Gordon had spoken.

Back in the big town across the State line the newspapers were taking up their usual cry of:

WHISPERER STRIKES AGAIN!
WHY DOESN'T COMMISSIONER GORDON ACT?

So The Whisperer walked slowly with others into the vaulted parole board room. The tall lawyer and the little, gray-haired mother of Lug Slanton were ahead of him. Others filed into an anteroom. The Whisperer sat down among them.

George Ganrow, chairman of the board, was a meek but honest man. He wiped his eyeglasses and peered at the six other men. All were there. Four of these men who held the freedom of hundreds in their hands were ranged on one side of the table.

They were Maten, Kultz, Spratt and Danvers. The four appeared to be sleeker and better fed than Ganrow and the other three on the board.

Some minor business was transacted, then the tall lawyer, named Jacklin, was summoned. He entered with a "Good afternoon, gentlemen. You don't mind if I introduce Mrs. Slanton first? The mother of Lug Slanton, you know."

George Ganrow, the chairman, peered hastily at his memos.

"Yes, yes," he said hastily, "Pleased to meet Mrs. Slanton."

"Lug Slanton?" murmured a board member inquiringly. "Why, I thought that his case didn't—"

Now in recent weeks, Maten, Kultz, Spratt and Danvers had become known as the "Big Four" of the board. It had come about when they had begun voting together solidly on every question. They held the majority.

Maten interrupted the questioning member.

"We have received some new information concerning Lug Slanton," he put in hastily. "Considerable error has turned up in his conviction. We have decided to hear his statement. His mother and a crippled sister have been on relief, and we are honestly convinced that Slanton desires only to be able to care for them."

Chairman Ganrow looked over his glasses at the Big Four, at Maten.

"Yes, that was the way it was presented to me, gentlemen," he said.

Lawyer Jacklin talked for only two minutes. He halted once to carry the trembling, gray-haired lady a glass of water. She was crying softly and had cupped one ear to hear what was being said.

LUG SLANTON was summoned and came humbly into the board room. Chairman Ganrow and the two not of the Big Four stared at him. The two members murmured together. But Lug Slanton's mother emitted a little cry. She crossed the room tremulously, and was in the hard arms of her son.

Lug Slanton said, "Mother, I'm glad you've come. Maybe things will be jake—I mean, all right now."

Lawyer Jacklin talked again. The Big Four had their heads together.

"I wanna—want just a chance to beat the rest—to gain my freedom to take care of my mother and sister—"

Lug Slanton held the floor. His mother trembled and sobbed. Lawyer Jacklin made a short and beautiful speech. It was soon over, because it had been over before the hearing opened. Plainly enough Chairman Ganrow and two members knew it would be. The Big Four voted solidly.

The door of the anteroom was slightly ajar. The Whisperer appeared to have little interest in what

was taking place in the board room. But all the voices came clearly. Others waiting were interested in only their own pleas to come up.

Chairman Ganrow announced. "Slanton, you have the good will of our board by majority vote. I hope you will make a man of yourself, go straight for your mother's sake. You will be ready within an hour, and you may check through the warden's office and leave with your mother and Attorney Jacklin."

The group of three passed through the anteroom. Lug Slanton's big arm was sustaining the trembling figure of his mother. Chairman Ganrow consulted a slip.

"We will see a Mr. Duval," he stated. "It is unusual, gentlemen, but a Jim Duval, just returned on an old parole charge, has a brother, Silas Duval, who has come to present some new evidence. We will see him."

When the name Silas Duval was called, The Whisperer entered. He said hoarsely that he was ill with a cold and could not talk loudly.

"But there is something, gentlemen, I think you should know about my brother Jim—"

A prison guard pushed open the door. He was escorting a Western Union messenger. The Whisperer ceased talking at this interruption. Chairman Ganrow opened the message addressed to the board as a whole.

The chairman's nearsighted eyes were suddenly so startled they seemed about to jump through his glasses. He gasped.

"This is incredible—a joke—gentlemen, this body is—"

Two guards entered, carrying a square box. Its weight took all their strength. Chairman Ganrow sprang to his feet. Maten, Fultz and Spratt also reared up. Spratt was staring at the box. Perhaps he was the only one who had seen the dark, scarlet seepage coming from a corner of the box.

Chairman Ganrow seemed to overlook the presence of The Whisperer, the self-announced brother of Jim Duval. Ganrow's hands were trembling.

"Don't—don't open—"

But Maten interrupted sharply:

"Whatever this thing is, open it up! Let me see that message, Ganrow!"

The lifting of the box's cover had been made easy by two small screws. The lid came off, and as if the thing in it were alive, a human hand stuck up where a sleeve had caught in a splinter.

ALL the board members now were on their feet. They were looking at the blood-drained face of Joe Lorton, a convict they had paroled only a few days before.

Blood still seeped from the body. Lorton's glazed eyes were open and staring. His head remained on his riven neck only because the box supported it.

Ganrow's voice held panic. There came an unexpected oath.

"Lorton? That message? I told you—Maten—Kultz, Spratt—"

"Shut up!" rapped out Maten, though his own double chin was quivering. "What crime is this? What does such an insult—such a dastardly—"

Danvers, who had remained silent, now gulped, "Who talked—who—"

Maten was a heavy, hard man. He was clearly the leader of the Big Four. His arm flew around and the back of his hand slapped across the mouth of Danvers.

"We'll investigate this—this message—this body—a murder has been committed—"

Curious faces jammed the door of the anteroom. Three guards snapped the door shut, but The Whisperer was standing in a corner of the board room and was overlooked. All kept their eyes on the gruesome corpse. Liquid seeped out and stained the expensive rug.

Maten said, "This message—"

Chairman Ganrow showed a flash of life.

"I've known it would happen ! You can't play with fire! The message says this Joe Lorton was on his way to commit a murder! So he has been sent back! And he—he called it a monument to our service to the State, to the country—he—"

"For Heaven's sake who—who?" gasped Spratt of the Big Four.

"The Whisperer," replied Chairman Ganrow, as if the words could scarcely leave his tongue. "He signed himself The Whisperer, and he said for this board to be on guard—if there were others, he would kill them first—kill them first!"

In the confusion, Maten was marshaling the strength of the Big Four.

"The Whisperer is a notorious crook—that's it! It's an act of vengeance—and we will have him—"

From the anteroom outside those who had seen the body were leaving hurriedly. Then an eerie, penetrating whisper filled the vaulted room of the parole board.

"None who has killed and is paroled will escape! The Whisperer has spoken! The Black Hood will also die!"

Every member of the board whirled about. Fear seemed to paralyze the three guards in the room. The attention of all had been centered upon the ghastly corpse, the monument to the State parole board's contribution to crime, to murder.

Now there was none in the big room except the board, the guards and the corpse. There were only three entry doors. The guards rushed these, but none could have been near any of the three and vanished so quickly. And none there thought of the high, barred window.

Outside in the prison yard, the convicts were milling about. The guards on duty were separating groups, getting the cons into line. A uniformed yelling suddenly broke out. Guards on the walls swung machine guns into position. Some visitors were seen leaving hurriedly. Others still in their cars were wondering what was happening. It required little to start a riot.

The sense of terror, of the unusual in the board room, had quickly permeated to the prisoners. But none saw then The Whisperer. Chairman Ganrow was adjourning the board. The warden had been summoned.

CHAPTER VII
DEATH'S MESSENGER

THE WHISPERER, with his ruse as a brother of Jim Duval, was outside the parole board building when his eerie, chilling message floated in through the high, barred windows. It was a daring, dangerous, but convincing stroke. A score or more visitors were entering their own cars or the station wagon in which The Whisperer had arrived.

Guards were busily engaged with the strangers, who they wanted very much to be outside if the sudden commotion among the cons started real trouble. The visitors would have been in a hot spot. Perhaps some would have been seized and used as shields for the suddenly aroused prisoners.

Machine guns guarded the big steel gates as they opened for the procession of cars to pass through. The Whisperer was inconspicuous in this commotion. He had not been observed as his weird whisper floated into the window.

And if there came any question to Jim Duval, "framed" back into the big house he had left ten years before, he would have instantly identified a brother named Silas. It was one of several minor items to which Jim Duval had agreed when his cooperation had been enlisted, and he had been informed of some facts about Barbara Rand that made him want to help clear up the holdup murder rackets.

One of these was that the girl's father was a long termer in the prison, and that much might threaten the girl he loved if some of the parole mystery was not cleared up.

After sending that astounding whisper into the board room, The Whisperer drifted along with the other outside visitors. But suddenly he glided to one side. And when the station wagon and all private cars but one were outside the gate, The Whisperer had vanished.

Turmoil. Confusion. Convicts being herded into the cell blocks.

In the administration offices a telephone worked to the office of the governor himself. News reporters, waiting a routine gist from the parole board, found themselves with an unexpected sensation to start headlines blazing again.

Joe Lorton, a paroled convict, had been shipped back dead. Moreover, the notorious Whisperer himself took the responsibility. Members of the parole board tried to keep it quiet, but a guard spilled the word that the chilling voice of The Whisperer himself had been in the vaulted board room.

"Why," claimed one of the guards to a reporter, "that whisper came from the corpse itself. I was looking right at the stiff, and his lips moved. And they didn't find any trace of anyone else, sp—"

Which added to the black headlines and caused Deputy Henry Bolton to have all possible means of entering the big town blocked. If The Whisperer was up the river, at the big house in the other State, then he would be returning.

Deputy Bolton entirely overlooked the important item that none of his men had ever seen The Whisperer to identify him. He gave out news reports the department would have The Whisperer in a few hours.

Mayor Van Royston sent out calls summoning Wildcat Gordon. But the commissioner was again as elusive as The Whisperer himself.

UP in his suite of five offices, Big Fist Leffler looked from newspaper headlines to Deacon Fram. Big Fist paid little attention as Deacon Fram announced he was bringing a new girl into the private offices. He might have been interested if he had noted the gleam in the Deacon's usually somber eyes.

Perhaps Deacon Fram had never before noticed a woman. Possibly, his attention had been called to the fair-haired Barbara Rand by the robbery that sent Jim Duval back to stir. Anyway, Deacon Fram had seen the pretty assistant cashier and with amazing suddenness had decided Big Fist's own offices—meaning his own—could use an extra girl.

But all this perhaps romantic side issue was not interesting Big Fist Leffler in the face of the new headlines. It has been said that Big Fist Leffler was a buccaneer of business. There were reports that he had been even more of a buccaneer in the old days. And those were the days when he had teamed up with Jack Hiley.

Looking at the newest headlines about the Joe Lorton delivery to the parole board and a rumored investigation by the governor, Big Fist smiled a little for the first time in several days.

"Deacon, maybe this damned stuff will stop this parole game," he said. "I was beginning to have an idea that some enemy of mine had got control of the board. And it wouldn't have been long until

Jack Hiley came out. I was even thinking of getting out of the country."

Deacon Fram nodded. He said, "I had been thinking of that, too, Big Fist. Jack Hiley would be more dangerous now than twenty years ago. He would have killed you then, and he probably would do it now. Of course, we might have thought of some way of keeping Hiley from coming back if he did get out. Only they pull this parole stuff without much warning. I was telling you about a Barbara Rand I have brought inside as a bookkeeper. I—"

"Barbara Rand, Deacon? Good heavens! You don't know—well, that's right. You didn't know much about Jack Hiley's private life, so it is only natural you might take a liking—"

Deacon Fram's smile was solemn. But there was a slyness in his eyes that covered for a time his Sunday-school teacher face.

"Sure, I know, Big Fist; there was a Barbara Rand who Jack Hiley married. All the same, I think the girl would have been wasted on that tough truck driver like—"

"Great heavens, Deacon! You don't mean to tell me you have fallen for a woman after all these years?"

The Deacon's face reddened.

"Maybe so, maybe not," he muttered. "But this Rand—or Hiley—girl is a swell looker, and she hasn't even seen her father, if she knows anything about him. Anyway, Big Fist, I believe in playing possible threats close to our chests. Then we can see what is going on."

Big Fist's heavy face lightened.

"A clever, a very damned clever idea, Deacon," he stated. "I'll tell you now that was exactly why I had Barbara Rand given a job out at Unity Steel. This is a better way. Send her in for a chat when you get time. I promise not to become romantic, not at my age."

NIGHT had fallen like a curtain blanking out all intrigue, but perhaps it was only furnishing cover for the crimes that came of intrigue.

Darkness had dropped over the yard of the big house. Members of the parole board had departed. A hard-faced warden had been in touch with the governor himself.

The warden had said, "I have no authority over the parole board. You have all the power, and—"

The warden got a setback, a sharp one.

"I'll look after my end!" rapped the governor. "The present parole board is very satisfactory to this office, whether or not others like it! Of course, the news hawks will stir up the pot for a few days, but it can be shown this killing of Joe Lorton, shipping him back, was the work of a worse killer than he had ever been! I'm joining forces over the line to help get this Whisperer and make any suspicion of the parole board look like political sop!"

Now the warden was hard, but an honest man. Sweat beaded his brow as the phone conversation ended. He was a political appointee himself. What the governor wanted was what he was compelled to want.

About this time a smoothly speeding sedan was rolling toward the big town over the State line. Attorney Jacklin, who had played the role of a lawyer in freeing Lug Slanton, was driving. Lug Slanton sat in the rear seat. He was wearing a cheap prison suit. But he was smoking a cigar and wearing a smile on his slanted mouth.

The cheap prison suit would be replaced by another one very soon.

Attorney Jacklin was driving fast. The curtains were pulled on the rear windows. Perhaps he did not quite relish this job. But the Black Hood paid high for those who served him. Anyway, another few miles and a pickup car for Lug Slanton would be waiting.

In the rear seat a peculiar thing had happened. The gray-haired mother who had appealed for her son, Lug Slanton, sat with one foot cocked up on the back of the seat ahead. She also was smoking a cigar. But the gray hair had disappeared. The wrinkled face showed the same, but the voice as not now a trembling falsetto. It was more of a profane growl.

"Hell, Lug!" observed the now black-haired mother. "I was taking a damnable chance on this play! Maybe I know my acting, but anything might have slipped!"

"What could slip, Roller, with the Black Hood having the Indian sign on the big end of that cheap screw board?" growled Lug Slanton. "The old mother stuff was just to make it look better to the outsiders! I know my onions, and I'm willing to pay off! But there hadn't better be any tricks like they've pulled on some of the others!"

"Roller" said, "Keep your shirt on, Lug! I'm in on this with you! The mugs that get bumped are them that maybe ain't needed again, see? And the Black Hood is for pulling this one fast, tonight. It's a bank job, and the night watchman is the fall guy for the Black Hood! There's a smart cashier, and one of the clerks in on the blow-off!"

"How in? Or out?"

"It's a one-horse bank, but there's a big roll this time of the month for payoffs at neighborhood plants. Well, most of that stuff ain't being put under the time lock tonight, savvy? The way is all clear, and the dough will be outside the vault. We'll have a pair of lookouts, but we pull the triggers, see?"

"The watchman, the cashier and the clerk, huh? That's like that Western bank job we pulled, Roller."

"You said it, Lug! The cashier and the clerk will be working late on the books. We lam in and right out again. The bank dummies are expecting to be taped up nice and tight. But they don't know how tight! They will be waiting for their split!"

"I getcha. You've got the rods with the silencers?"

"Right here under my faded skirt, Lug! It looks better for the bank boys to be heroes when they're found than to be maybe talking too much or blowing their tops. Then you and me are taking our share and lamming back West!"

"Cheapest parole I ever bought!" grunted Lug Slanton. "Everything set and—"

It sounded as if a spring in the cushion at the back of the seat had snapped. A sharp, cracking noise that became more of a hissing. As if the back seat had been pumped up and compressed air was being released.

"Lug?" rasped Roller beside. "Lug, what the hell!"

ROLLER was rearing up in the rear seat. Attorney Jacklin's head snapped around. The big sedan slued around, but did not leave the road. Jacklin saw the huge body of Lug Slanton sag forward until his face was resting upon the back of the front seat. Then Slanton gurgled horribly and a crimson flood spewed from his twisted mouth.

Slanton did not speak then. He never did speak. Roller was jerking open the curtain of the side window, peering out.

Snap! His-s-s-s!

The same sound of compressed air being released. The man Roller, with his cheap, cotton dress, which he had not yet removed, jumped up, his unwigged head jamming into the roof. He twisted, but a man with a slug in his spine doesn't require the addition of a crack on the skull.

"Jacklin—the damned—"

Three gulped words that told nothing as he died and slumped down over the body of Slanton. Attorney Jacklin pulled desperately, keeping the big sedan on the concrete. The lawyer felt as if ice water was dripping on the back of his neck. His eyes glared wildly. Other cars were passing.

He held to the road, not daring to pull up here. He was quite a distance from the spot where Lug Slanton and Roller were to have transferred to the pickup car provided by the Black Hood.

No groans, no gasping of dying men behind him. Men who already are dead do not voice any pain. There is none.

But there was suddenly a weird, penetrating whisper that filled the space of the car.

"You will drive to the first turnaround, Jacklin, if you want to live! You get that break only because I do not know that you have murdered anyone !"

Like a chill wind whispering a message of death. Jacklin's head jerked around as if pulled on a string. His eyes searched frantically. This fantastic thing could not be happening. There was no other person in the dark car. Not even a car traveling behind the sedan.

Then Jacklin saw it. A ragged place in the rear-seat cushion. An opening that had been carefully and silently carved through with a knife. A knife that had first to whittle cautiously through the inner board lining of the big built-in trunk of the sedan.

And through that ragged place projected the clumsy muzzle of a pistol with a strange silencer. Back of this one eye seemed to glitter. The voice whispered again.

"Do as you are told, Jacklin! This toy will shoot through two-inch steel! Remember that I know all about this bank job and the murders! So you will turn around and drive back downriver!"

The rat attorney's arms were so numbed he maneuvered the car with difficulty, but his brain was not paralyzed. If he could get to the crossing where the pickup car was waiting!

"Turn now!" came the eerie, ghostly whisper. "Perhaps you did not see Joe Lorton! I am The Whisperer!"

Jacklin saw it now, the pickup car. And he was aware that the special blue foglight below his front bumper would be identified. Perhaps there was a slight chance. But he could not take that now. Still his wits were at work again. He swung the sedan on the four-track highway, suddenly, with squealing rubber. If the pickup car would only catch that blue foglight!

For now Jacklin was fully aware that by some damnable magic, the unseen Whisperer had opened or broken the lock of his car's trunk. He must have been inside when he rolled from the prison yard.

Jacklin rolled back down the highway, the road that to him represented an exposure that would rock a bar association, especially an association that long had been ready to put a finger on his rattish activities.

THE WHISPERER had been in a cramped position for a long time. The lid of the trunk was closed. It was an unlucky break that he could not see the new pair of headlights darting into the highway. Headlights that took up the trail of the sedan, a driver for none other than Crulls Yanna, trailing until he could make sure this sedan with the blue light had not been a mistake.

The Crulls Yanna driver rolled no closer, but he held his position. The Whisperer was watching the back of Jacklin's head. Again he whispered.

"When we get to the big house gates, you will signal you had trouble! As you stop for the gates to open, I will be out of here and off to one side! If you crack once before you are inside and the gates are closing, you will join these mugs on the floor!"

The guards on the prison gates saw the sedan swerve into the short road from the main highway. They were instantly alert. The car following passed the prison road, turned quickly in the highway and came back.

The prison gate lights flared on. Jacklin called out in a shaky voice.

"Had some trouble, boys! For Heaven's sake open up! I'm bringing back Lug Slanton! He's—"

"Enough, if you want to live!" commanded the ghostly whisper.

The trunk lid snapped and The Whisperer glided into a side ditch.

CHAPTER VIII
THE WHISPERER TRAPPED

PRISON guards were appearing on the walls with machine guns. Any unannounced arrival in the night must be closely examined. Two wicked, slim snouts were covering the sedan. None saw the grayish shadow of The Whisperer as he glided down a bank into a weed-filled ditch.

Now Attorney Jacklin had glanced back and seen the withdrawal of the menacing pistol. The big gates started to open slowly. The lawyer perhaps believed his voice might not have been recognized. In this he was correct. The night guards were new and they identified Jacklin's car, knew that Lug Slanton had been taken away in it, and decided to admit the vehicle with scrutinizing caution.

The gate lights threw a circle into which the hood of the sedan had been halted. Attorney Jacklin must have believed the darkness beside the driver's door afforded a last-second opportunity to possibly clear himself of a trap little to be desired.

There was Roller, the bogus old lady, dead with Lug Slanton. That of itself would put Jacklin on a spot that would be meat and drink to the bar association. Even the political influence of the State governor could not help him much.

The gates opened wider. Jacklin's hands left the wheel. He prayed he was on the side away from the vanished Whisperer. Anyway, it was better to take a chance with a bullet in the darkness than with his future reputation in the glaring light of publicity.

Jacklin made swift movements. The door was opened. He jerked the shift bar into low. He sprang from the running board. The sedan shot forward, but swerved, twisting toward one of the guards on the ground.

A brilliant floodlight flashed at that moment. It caught the leaping, fleeing figure of Jacklin fully in its glare.

"Look out! Stop that car! Get that driver!"

A guard with a machine gun cut loose. Gray lead streamed unseen in the flaring floodlight. A man's scream arose on the night. But the sedan rammed into a column at one side of the gate, cutting off the death cry. Attorney Jacklin's screaming was lost in the roaring crash. The two bodies of Lug Slanton and Roller were tossed from the broken side of the car. These were instantly surrounded by shouting guards.

Jacklin had picked the wrong side of the car. His long body dived into the weedy ditch, barely missing the crouched Whisperer. The car held up the guards for perhaps a minute as they identified the corpses.

"Buzz the warden!" yelled a guard to a towerman. "I'll pick up the driver! You was too damn fast, Bill, with that chopper! It'll be tough if you plunked Jacklin! He stands in!"

The floodlight followed this guard. It swept across the ditch. But it did not reveal the tops of waving weeds. The guard floundered into mud and swore. He kicked around.

"Hey, you fellas! Come down here, a couple of yuh! That driver ain't here, but there's blood going into the swamp! Hell! If you did get him, Bill, he'll croak in there quick!"

THOUGH the floodlight followed and a dozen guards were trying to find a trail into the swamp weeds, they missed the creeping figure of The Whisperer. Strangely enough, The Whisperer was swearing at himself, at his own stupidity. In his desire to provide another dramatic denouement of the parole board he had overlooked one important item.

He should have captured Attorney Jacklin alive. The quickest man to squeal is a shyster mouthpiece when he is in a jam. The Whisperer hoped the lawyer still lived. But the body over his shoulders was very limp. A stream of blood trickled over The Whisperer's neck. The shouting, plunging guards were knee-deep in mud. Weeds grew above their heads. They had been easy to avoid. The floodlights could not reveal what might be under the weeds.

The Whisperer reached the main highway, still dragging Jacklin. He saw lights of cars moving in both directions. Would it be possible to put the bee on some lone driver and have himself and Jacklin hauled to the big town?

The Whisperer regretted that he had not let Quick Trigger in on his visit and had a car waiting. But the developments had been unanticipated. He had not known he would be sending back another parole bird dead.

A car was coming in the right direction. There was a single man in the front seat. The Whisperer was watching this, so he missed another car that had been darkened and parked off the road.

Missed it, until gripping hands from behind closed around his neck. A fist made one ear sing. The muzzle of a gun prodded his back.

"Quiet, mug, or you'll get it here!"

The Whisperer was quiet, but he got it anyway. A rod made his skull crack. He was not quite out, but he had no power to fight for several seconds. He was caught up and pulled along the highway toward the darkened car.

At the same time, two men had discovered Attorney Jacklin. Low oaths broke out. One of the men said, "Go easy on this chump! Maybe he was in with Jacklin! Anyway, he was dragging him away from them damned screws! Load 'em in the bus!"

Floodlights and machine gunning had stopped several cars farther along the road. The Whisperer and the bleeding body of Jacklin were dumped into a car together. The Whisperer let it appear he had been conked.

Crulls Yanna was in command. The Whisperer identified his voice and that of one other man. He heard Yanna say, "Maybe we made a damn mess of our little cross on the Black Hood. If the cops stumble on that truck with the little dame an' Big Fist Leffler all tied up, we're sunk. Step on it!"

In their haste, the mobsters had failed to search The Whisperer. He was unknown to any of them. For the few minutes they were doubtful of his status with the dead Attorney Jacklin and the Black Hood, he was safe.

An extra danger now threatened. The gang car slithered through traffic, making high speed for the big town. The Whisperer had little doubt about what the eventful day had produced. Among other things would be police patrols stopping all cars at the State line, which was just outside the city.

If Yanna's car was stopped, the presence of the dead man—with The Whisperer a bleeding prisoner himself—would involve too many complications for even the wily Wildcat Gordon to explain. Crulls Yanna must be a little crazy not to have thought of that. But Crulls was crunching on a hard doughnut with his horselike teeth.

This nonchalance of the mob boss was quickly explained. Lying on the floor, The Whisperer became aware of jolting over a road off the concrete. A big, yellow truck stood there. It looked as if it were loaded with farm produce.

IN one minute the supposedly unconscious Whisperer and the body of Attorney Jacklin had been passed through the outside crates. When he was bumped onto the floor, The Whisperer opened one eye cautiously. There was a small light. Two men in overalls were on the driver's seat.

The space inside the produce crates was ample for all the mobsters, and their own car was driven away. Perhaps it would return over the road it had come. The Whisperer heard stertorous breathing. In a moment, he discovered this came from the nose of a big man whose eyes and mouth were tightly taped.

A bloody gash on the big prisoner's head showed that he must be completely out. But his arms and legs had been bound. There was another figure, a mere bundle of clothes in one corner of the truck, but The Whisperer could not see the face. He had no means of guessing who this might be.

But the unconscious, bound man was Big Fist Leffler.

Crulls Yanna said, "This goes all the way across! There are eight of us in on this! Truck Roman knocked off Big Fist Leffler in his car. When the word gets to Deacon Fram, it will be a nice pick-up! And that's one we split our own way! The Black Hood don't go for snatches!"

The Whisperer could judge Yanna spoke the truth. His hands cunningly made certain he still retained his two silenced pistols. That had been a dumb act, assuming he might be in with Jacklin and not putting the frisk on him.

"And," said Crulls Yanna, "there may be another pickup to split on the dame. Maybe it won't be nice and sweet, and if the Black Hood discovers we have put the bee on another woman, it's going to be damned unhealthy for all of us! All set, let's go!"

Big Fist Leffler snatched?

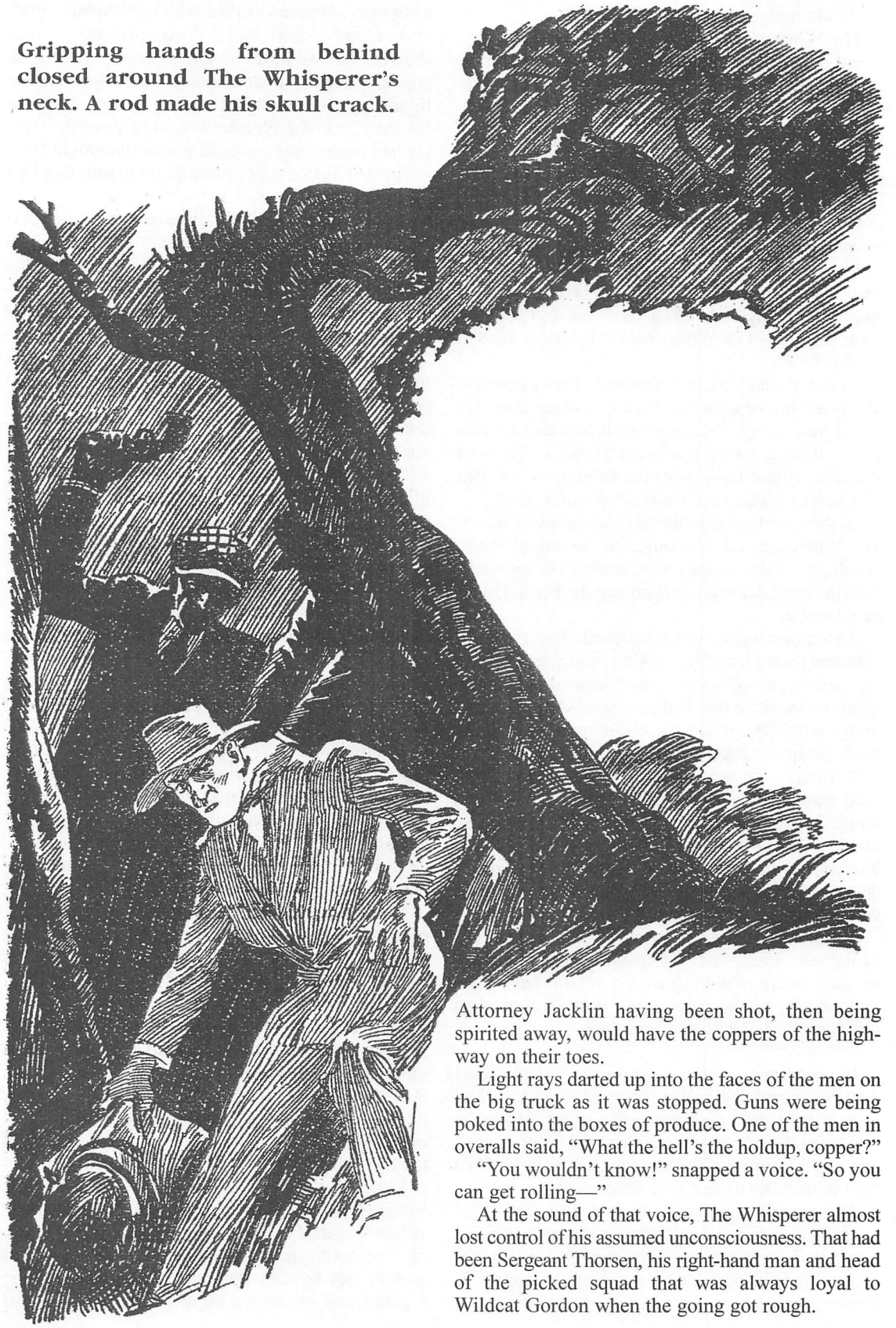
If there was a demand for ransom, even the latest dramatic episode of The Whisperer would be forgotten in the big town. Big Fist was tops in publicity. Deacon Fram undoubtedly would command plenty of cash and balk the police to assure himself that Big Fist was safely returned.

But the other? The Black Hood would not like it having another woman snatched. The Whisperer swore more than ever, mentally, at failing to put the clamps tighter on Barbara Rand. It sounded as if her black hood may have meant what it seemed. Especially that other woman stuff, unless the mob-leader was referring to some other snatch in the past.

It was not far to the State line. The yellow truck rumbled along as if it bore a heavy load. The Whisperer had not moved. One of Yanna's hoods suggested that maybe they had hit him too hard, if he turned out to be a friend.

"Forget it, Bugs!" snapped Yanna to that. "You ain't got no friends in this racket! You play 'em as they lay, and if we can pull this cross and grease ourselves on the Black Hood, what the hell! Anyway, the split for the Black Hood had been fifty percent of everything, and it's too damned much! But I'll tag the first mug personally that spills anything!"

Long lines of cars stood at the State line. The Whisperer grew tense. He could hear the rumbling voices of patrol cops. They were going from car to car. No doubt, he was the original object of their search. But by this time the return dead of Lug Slanton and his bogus mother, and the report of



Gripping hands from behind closed around The Whisperer's neck. A rod made his skull crack.

Attorney Jacklin having been shot, then being spirited away, would have the coppers of the highway on their toes.

Light rays darted up into the faces of the men on the big truck as it was stopped. Guns were being poked into the boxes of produce. One of the men in overalls said, "What the hell's the holdup, copper?"

"You wouldn't know!" snapped a voice. "So you can get rolling—"

At the sound of that voice, The Whisperer almost lost control of his assumed unconsciousness. That had been Sergeant Thorsen, his right-hand man and head of the picked squad that was always loyal to Wildcat Gordon when the going got rough.

Sergeant Thorsen had a wooden face, and apparently a wooden mind. He had once been in the army. When Wildcat had become police commissioner, Sergeant Thorsen had accepted him as his superior officer. Wildcat was the general of the department to Thorsen.

In their breaking of many cases, The Whisperer sometimes suspected that Thorsen knew more than he ever would tell of his crook identity.

But there were other coppers, highway and city, out there with Thorsen. Any break now would be fatal. The big truck rolled on. All that The Whisperer could tell of its route was supplied by the sudden rumbling between deserted buildings, an absence of the sounds of other street traffic.

Big doors creaked open. The truck drove into a huge old warehouse.

CRULLS YANNA worked fast. The prisoners were carried down a slimy, moist stairway. The Whisperer got the reek, the fishy odor of water, and he knew they were somewhere on West River. The room was underground, but there was an opening where a launch lay in a small dock.

Under dim lights the prisoners were laid on the stone floor.

The Whisperer could determine only that the room was big and gloomy. Big Fist Leffler gave no sign of coming out of his stupor. Perhaps he was already dead. No view was given of the bundled girl, who was carried to a table in the room not far from the swaying launch.

Then Crulls Yanna's rumbling voice came between crunching of his horselike teeth on a dried doughnut or perhaps pretzel. Undoubtedly, the tough mobster would pick up his last slugs with his mouth full of crumbs.

"We've gotta work fast, Truck!" said Yanna. The Whisperer could see the giant strong-arm, Truck Roman. "Wake up the dame!"

"Just a minute, Crulls," said one of the other men, there now being eight men beside Yanna that The Whisperer could count. "What about this stiff, Jacklin?"

Crulls Yanna did not even turn his face toward the bloody body of the shyster lawyer.

"Dump him in the creek—wait! Wire a chunk of that iron on his feet. If they ever drag him up, the cops will be just dumb enough to think maybe he crossed some of the boys!"

The body went splashing into the filthy, black water of West River. Attorney Jacklin had served his last habeas corpus, argued for a murderer for the last time. His score was paid.

"O.K., Truck!" rumbled Yanna. "Give her a powder that will open her eyes! Maybe we can dig a pay roll out of her that won't be blocked by this damned Whisperer! After that, we may leave her along the road, an' then she will be in Wildcat Gordon's hair! He's strong for the dame!"

The Whisperer hunched himself at that, one hand fingering a flat pistol that came from a holster laid against his stomach under his trousers band. He had not been able to identify the girl.

Could it be Tiny Traeger? Had Crulls Yanna suspected Wildcat's interference in the frame-up plans for Jim Duval and Barbara Rand? Had Tiny been attempting to locate him?

It would not be the first time that Tiny had started out on her own to find Wildcat, when she had suspected that he was mixed up on some dangerous case. Many times the blue-eyed Tiny had herself faced death, sometimes helping, sometimes interfering with Wildcat's activities.

But The Whisperer tried to discard the idea. He was marking the position of the mobsters. Two had crowded with Yanna and Truck Roman beside the table on which the girl had been laid. But the other men were in scattered positions. Two were invisible at the moment.

Though he was touching his effective guns, ready to spray death, The Whisperer knew that taking a chance before an opportune moment arrived would be worse than letting events ride until a break came.

THEN there was a tiny flare of light over by the table. Immediately there came a girl's scream that was filled with agony. The Whisperer shifted his position slightly, caught the vision of smooth, white skin between the men at the table.

One of the girl's legs had been bared. It was as perfect as sculptured marble. The Whisperer cursed to himself, seeking desperately to locate the position of the other mobsters. He saw that flaring light put to the white skin.

Again the girl screamed. This time it made words, high-pitched, as the perfect leg tried to jerk away from the flame.

"Oh, please! What do you want? Don't—I can't—"

"O.K., Truck!" grated Yanna. "She's a swell dish! But this is business now! We'll find out what she knows, an' then we'll—"

The girl's scream had died to a moan, but her voice came through.

"I'll never tell anything—I'll—"

"O.K., Truck!" said Yanna.

The Whisperer did not see what was done. The tortured cry that broke out was beyond endurance of any man, especially with the butts of two silenced automatics wrapped in his fists. Without moving his body, The Whisperer sent hissing, blue flame leaping out. There was only the sound as if compressed air had been released.

The two men beside Truck Roman and Crulls

Yanna jumped as if they had been stung. The Whisperer did not have to be told they had died on their feet. The flame that had tortured the girl had outlined their heads, and the back of each skull was a bloody mass.

Crulls Yanna and Truck whipped around, hands darting for guns and vile oaths spilling from their tongues. The Whisperer had the advantage of being in a shadowed corner. He rolled still deeper into concealment, whipping the guns around at two other men.

Then one mobster was quick thinking. He dived behind a stone foundation pillar, catching up a machine gun as he went. The chopper racketed, sending slugs whining from the concrete floor. The lead spun and screamed, searching.

Yanna and Truck were lunging away from the girl on the table. They were seeking the wall where they could get at The Whisperer. The Whisperer attempted a daring feat, though he did not use his voice. He came erect, glided to one side and two bullets broke the arm of the man with the machine gun.

"Get the mug! Who the hell left them rods on him?" roared Yanna.

The Whisperer was silent with deliberation. None of these men knew him as The Whisperer. With the dental plate in his mouth, he could not speak in an attempt at command without revealing his secret.

Other guns were smashing. But The Whisperer dived to the floor, gained the protection of the stone pillar where the machine gun lay. He caught it up and a blast roared across the room, cutting off one mobster above the knees.

Crulls Yanna ripped out, "Get the lights, Truck!"

The few, dim globes in the room darkened. The gloom was impenetrable. The Whisperer had no targets. He started toward the table on which the girl lay. A bullet stopped him, brought oblivion.

CHAPTER IX
THE BLAST OF DEATH

CRULLS YANNA shouted, "That got him, but get the girl out!"

The Whisperer did not hear this. The bullet that hit him had glanced from the barrel of the machine gun. It had seemed like a fiery explosion in the middle of his forehead. As a matter of fact, the slug had only parted his hair in the middle and made an ugly scalp wound.

There were scurrying movements in the darkness. The lights came on, then they went out. A fuse had been blown.

"We'll take the launch!" directed Yanna. "The girl first! Maybe the blastin' has been heard an' we'll have the cops on our hands!"

So it happened that The Whisperer arrived at the aching consciousness that he was still alive just as mobsters' feet scuffled across the floor. Apparently they were making for the bound and taped figure of Big Fist Leffler. The Whisperer did not know that. He was not aware of anything but the instinctive grip he had kept on the mob chopper.

The machine gun racketed. This time the stream cut across the path of Yanna, Truck and the others. Yanna let out a roar.

"Pull out, Truck, before the River Patrol starts snoopin'! We can't wait! Anyway, Big Fist will keep—"

The Whisperer sent slugs in the general direction of the mob leader's voice. They must have missed. The Whisperer dragged himself slowly to his knees. His head was spinning, and when he put up his hands he could not be sure that some of his brains had not been let out. He fell back to the floor.

Crulls Yanna and his men, then, could not know they might have removed Big Fist Leffler with the girl. The launch motor exploded. The Whisperer could have used the chopper again, but he felt sure the girl was on the boat. He did not want to hit her accidentally.

The put-put of the launch died away. Near The Whisperer was a muffled moan. It was Big Fist Leffler. He mumbled and groaned through the tape over his mouth. The Whisperer touched the body of a mobster as he crawled over.

"Mum-m-m-m!"

Big Fist Leffler was writhing, trying to free himself. For only a few seconds, The Whisperer forgot his role.

"Keep quiet! I'll have you out of here!"

That struck Big Fist's ears with an eerie, penetrating whisper. A sibilant sound that might have come from a graveyard ghost. The tape was being pulled from his mouth.

"The Whisperer!" roared Big Fist. "You'll pay for—"

A blow tapped his head. It was not enough to be serious, but it was enough.

A minute later, the bindings were off of Big Fist Leffler's arms and legs. He was pulled over near the outside door. The Whisperer had no flashlight. He went through the door into the gloomy warehouse.

The big, yellow truck with its bogus load of produce was gone. He judged it had not stayed after delivering Crulls Yanna and the others. But in the underground room, Big Fist Leffler was groping his way out.

WITHIN another half hour the head of Unity Corporations was relating to Deacon Fram, Mayor Van Royston and Deputy Henry Bolton the facts of his kidnapping. All were in Wildcat Gordon's office.

In the midst of the recital the missing commissioner himself swaggered in. He was wearing a loud serge suit, his red necktie and a fresh carnation. His army hat was cocked over one eye, and his stubby pipe sent up a cloud.

"What the hell's all this about being snatched?" he said to Big Fist Leffler. "And why did they let you go?"

"I'm not in position to demand to know where our police commissioner had kept himself while hell was breaking loose," said Big Fist. "But I was grabbed in my car and knocked out. I've a bump like an egg on my head."

Wildcat had a sore spot on his own head, concealed by his army hat.

Deacon Fram rubbed the tips of his fingers together.

"We have come, Commissioner Gordon, to demand better police protection," he said, in a cold voice. "There have been rumors of a criminal known as the Black Hood operating freely, and it is believed he has something to do with these parole crimes. Mr. Leffler knows The Whisperer was one of the gang that kidnapped him. He heard his voice. Putting two and two together, it is fairly sure the Black Hood is The Whisperer, branching out on a new line.

"With that thought in mind, we demand the apprehension of The Whisperer within twenty-four hours, or we shall take steps to put a new commissioner into your chair."

SERGEANT TOM THORSEN

Wildcat had seated himself at his desk, and his yellow shoes were erected on it. It seemed as if one deadly, colorless eye was sighted over a toe. That was but for a second. The next instant the yellow shoes slapped on the floor.

Mayor Van Royston, all dressed up for a night party, moved apprehensively.

"Commissioner Gordon, you will remember the position occupied by Mr. Leffler and Deacon Fram. You will—"

"I'm damned tired and fed up with the positions of some of the big winds that blow into this office!" grated Wildcat's chilled-steel voice. "So you demand, do you, Deacon Fram? Well, while I'm police commissioner, I'll do some demanding myself! You, Fram, and you, Leffler, get the hell out of my office and stay out of it!"

Deacon Fram arose with a pious expression of outrage.

"Mayor Van Royston, this means that Mr. Leffler withdraws all his support until you have—"

Deacon Fram's rage was dignified, but only as long as it required Wildcat to reach him. Then the goodly Deacon Fram found himself whirling dizzily toward the office door, the slack of his trousers and his coat collar firmly grasped by Wildcat.

Detective Sergeant Thorsen was standing beside the door. His wooden face did not change expression as he automatically opened the door. Deacon Fram was propelled through it to his hands and knees.

It may have been the first time any one had ever heard the sanctimonious Deacon Fram let go of his tongue. It may have done his soul a great deal of good. Certainly it would not have rated him as a Sunday-school teacher.

"You can't do anything like that and stay in office!" roared Big Fist Leffler, heaving to his feet.

Big Fist rushed Wildcat with both fists swinging.

"I never hit a man old enough to be my father," snapped Wildcat, expertly rolling away from the swinging knuckles, "but I do happen to be in command of a few thousand policemen! You'll cool off in a cell, Leffler, and all your millions won't keep you from doing it until one of your hired mouthpieces routs out someone among the city magistrates you own! Take him, Sergeant Thorsen!"

Rage bellowed from Big Fist Leffler's throat. He whirled, but Sergeant Thorsen locked his wrists firmly.

MAYOR VAN ROYSTON grew apoplectic. There went a flock of votes for the reform ticket.

"Gordon, stop this!" flared his honor. "You're suspended! You can't do—"

"Lock him up, Sergeant Thorsen, but make no effort to detain him if a lawyer gets here with the proper papers! Hellamighty! Mayor Van Royston, I

would think you would learn that while I command the police, I run the works!"

Deacon Fram was standing outside the door, staring speechlessly.

There was something sturdy and tough about Big Fist Leffler. Something perhaps from those early days of his rash methods.

"You may release my wrists, Sergeant Thorsen," said Big Fist calmly. His eyes under the bulging brows surveyed the stocky figure of Wildcat Gordon. "I will be locked up, sergeant, to cool off. Mayor Van Royston, don't make any mistake in the matter of suspending or fighting this Wildcat Gordon of yours. I wish I had a few men with his guts in my own organization."

Big Fist turned away, back to Sergeant Thorsen. Wildcat stepped forward.

"It took more guts than I've got to say for what you just did, Big Fist," he stated. "We'll shake hands and call it a draw."

Leffler's fist clasped that of Wildcat Gordon.

"We'll shake hands, Gordon," he said, "but we won't call anything a draw. I'm going back to cool off, and there will be no lousy mouthpiece around to get me out. Let's go, Sergeant Thorsen."

Wildcat nodded and grinned. Mayor Van Royston nearly swallowed his retreating chin. The mayor had had little experience with fighters who could take it.

Deacon Fram padded out of headquarters, his pious face grimly set. He had just taken a double licking. If Big Fist did not back him up, it would have to ride.

"Sergeant Thorsen," said Wildcat, when he had come back from the cells, "you will scatter your detective detail. I want this Whisperer picked up, if you can find him. But I am also wanting Crulls Yanna, Truck Roman, and any others who may be with them. I'll be in my rooms. Tell any snooping reporters to get all their information from up the river."

The reporters had been getting plenty of that information. Wildcat Gordon strode from his office. He was not on his way to his penthouse. His immediate business was checking on the whereabouts of Barbara Rand. Then, he intended looking up the addresses in their home State of four men named Maten, Spratt, Kultz and Danvers, the Big Four of the downriver parole board.

Wildcat received sudden information concerning Barbara Rand. Outside headquarters, old Quick Trigger braked a coupé to a stop.

"Barbara Rand left the Unity Corporations office buildin' at four this afternoon, Wildcat," he reported. "She got into a taxicab. I lost the taxi. She has not returned to her apartment hotel."

"I was damnably sure of that," said Wildcat. "For the moment, there is nothing we can do about it. Our only hope is having Crulls Yanna and his mob picked up, and that's a slim chance. In the meantime, we can only take a little ride. We may be making a visit to a man named Maten. He is the big one of the Big Four of the downriver parole board."

"Geeminy whiz!" squeaked Quick Trigger. "That's over in the other State, Wildcat! You haven't any—"

"I've been over in the other State, Quick Trigger," interrupted Wildcat. "I even know a judge over there. I might do a stretch downriver myself and—"

"Wildcat, sometimes we ain't done so good, but this is gettin' worse!" groaned old Quick Trigger.

AS Wildcat Gordon was framing his latest foray outside his own police jurisdiction, his picked coppers were finding no leads to Crulls Yanna and his mobsters. As daylight broke in the big town, and the newspapers had to double their headlines to take in the latest killings at the State prison and the inexplicable arrest of Big Fist Leffler, reported by Deacon Fram, a big, yellow truck half loaded with farm produce was sitting in a barnyard.

A low, rambling farmhouse was situated in a grove of poplars nearly a mile from its nearest neighbor. It was well for the peace of the countryside that the house was thus placed.

Shortly before noon there had been wild screams. A few men lounging about the yellow truck in the yard grinned evilly and shrugged their shoulders.

"She's hell for grit, that dame," said one of the men. "Truck Roman has been doing his stuff for nearly an hour. He ain't human, Truck ain't."

This one and the other men did not seem to consider they weren't much on the human order themselves. The girl's cries rose and fell inside the farmhouse.

The fair-haired Barbara Rand, with her brown eyes reddened and her face drawn and haggard, lay across a bed. Though she had screamed often, the torture that had been administered had not brought the information that glowering Crulls Yanna was seeking.

Now this last bit of fiendish device had caused her to faint twice, only to be awakened by the exquisite agony. Strangely enough, it was one instrument of torture as old as the Spanish Inquisition.

Two small screws were clamped upon her thumb nails. Truck Roman was leering, almost drooling with enjoyment. He was giving little twists to the thumbscrews.

Each time the points pressed deeper into the girl's thumbnails. Her nerves had become wires of burning fire that seemed to be rupturing the blood vessels in her brain.

Now at last her head rolled to one side. She slowly nodded.

"Yes—yes—only take them off, and I'll tell you one—a payroll this very day—at four o'clock today, on the hour—and it's a big pay roll—fifty thousand maybe—"

"Ease up, Truck," directed Yanna. "Let's hear it, an' if it sounds good, we'll take the dame along. If it turns out right, we'll let her go, an' if it don't, we'll—"

Barbara Rand was weak and sick. Her eyes were popping, staring. It seemed that her limit of endurance had been reached. Burning pain still throbbed through her body after the thumbscrews had been removed. But she talked.

"If it doesn't turn out—well, I've done all I could—it's the Unity Marble Mine at the bend of West River in the hills where—"

PERHAPS half an hour later there were nine men besides Yanna in the truck that left the old farmhouse. For once, Yanna had done what he could to make somebody more comfortable. Barbara Rand lay on a blanket with her tortured hands bandaged.

The truck was a light vehicle, one that might have been employed by any farmer for the hauling of light stuff, but the body was wholly enclosed. Moreover, the ordinary-appearing truck had armored steel sides and top under its wooden exterior.

The lone driver was wearing blue workstained overalls.

Crulls Yanna bent over the girl. He was assuring himself of all the details she had related.

"The Unity Marble Mine is one of the corporation plants," said Barbara Rand. "They work a five-day, forty-hour week up there. This is Friday. Every Friday, at exactly four o'clock, a blue advertising wagon of the Unity brings the pay roll in cash.

"I've helped count it, and it's always more than fifty thousand. The blue wagon drives up to the office. It waits there until the men come off shift at four-thirty. Then they are paid."

Yanna asked a quick question.

"Exactly four o'clock. There's one road coming into the marble pit from above. About two hundred yards from the mine office, where the blue wagon will be, is a notch in the road. Your men can get down among the broken marble dumps in there and be ready to rush the payroll wagon when it shows up. It is always exact, for they've never had any holdup out here."

"Guards?" demanded Yanna.

"There are three, but they are always at the office when the blue wagon arrives. I think they are some of the men who have shotguns."

Yanna glanced at the four machine guns in the body of the truck. Even the outside road they were traveling carried but little traffic. There were at least a dozen highways for escape. Then there was the river with the launch that had been used to bring the girl to the farmhouse.

Crulls Yanna nodded. He said it was a sweet setup. And he suddenly became generous.

"If it works out, baby, you will be slipped a grand for yourself and a ticket out of town," he said. "And you will use the ticket, or else—"

"Oh, I'll go—I'll go!" promised Barbara Rand.

Yanna winked at Truck Roman. Whether it worked out or not, Barbara Rand never would ride on a ticket out of town. Nor would she ever see the big town. There was the West River waiting.

IT was well for his complacent belief in himself that Crulls Yanna did not see a battered sedan and another battered coupé on a road that lay across one quarter section of land. Yanna did not know that two men left at the farmhouse were now tightly bound in the bottom of the sedan.

And it was the long-nosed Deputy Henry Bolton who sat at the wheel of the bigger car. The men who were prisoners showed the effects of a terrible beating. But Deputy Bolton felt that he had pulled one of the smartest tricks of his career.

For Deputy Bolton had learned something from Big Fist Leffler. And he had located the old warehouse where Big Fist had been held prisoner. Wildcat being absent, and Sergeant Thorsen scouting elsewhere for Crulls Yanna, Deputy Bolton had gathered a squad and investigated.

Big Fist had described the launch he had seen. Hours later, Deputy Bolton had come upon the launch far upriver. He had been smart enough to follow a trail that led him to the old farmhouse. There his men had descended in a surprise attack. The mobsters left behind had been beaten until one had squealed.

So Deputy Bolton was headed for the Unity Marble Mine. If he could put this over on Wildcat—well, that commissionership might be just around the corner.

Taking Barbara Rand's suggestion, Yanna held back his light-armored truck on the winding, narrow road leading into the marble mine until his watch marked five minutes before four o'clock. Then the driver eased it down the hill. Many men could be seen at work above the road.

The truck came closer, and at Barbara Rand's suggestion, its motor was cut off and it coasted silently to a gouged cut between the white walls of the upper part of the mine.

It lacked but two minutes to four o'clock when Yanna had the truck halted. Just ahead were many small piles of marble fragments. The office could be seen in the pit about two hundred yards away. There was no blue wagon in sight as yet, and it was supposed to come up from the road below.

"Into them marble piles and keep your heads down!" ordered Yanna. "Wait until the driver of the blue wagon has climbed from the seat. Then break down upon the office with the chopper blasting!

We'll turn the truck and be ready for the getaway when you've got the dough!"

Barbara Rand's eyes were closed. She opened them slowly. If Yanna had been noticing, he would have seen that her lips were deathly white. It might have been because of the betrayal she felt she had made of the unsuspecting men at the marble mine. But her lips moved, as if she were uttering a silent prayer.

All the mobsters but Crulls Yanna and Truck Roman were in the marble piles, creeping closer to the office, with the main working wall of the mine just above them. Again Yanna might have thought it curious that now no men seemed to be working in that section.

The blue wagon had not yet appeared. Yanna's watch showed one minute before four o'clock. Suddenly there was a faint shout from the hill above. A working marble miner was dashing down a winding pathway toward the men already crouched in hiding to ambush the payroll driver and those at the office.

"By the gods!" yelled Crulls Yanna. "The dame has told us the truth! Burn that mug on the hill before he gets below, then rush the office! He may get there in time to turn the payroll wagon!"

A single vicious crack came from among the marble slags. A puff of blue smoke. The man coming down the hill apparently had seen the truck and the men in the concealed spots. For he was waving his arms wildly.

Barbara Rand could see him from the driver's seat of the truck. Her lips became almost stiff as she murmured.

"No! No! He's risking his life, and they'll—"

The girl closed her eyes as the running man started pitching down the pathway. He went down with a last wave of his arms. There may have been a satisfied smirk on the face of the gunman who had got him. Crulls Yanna was hanging over the driver's seat, gesturing. Truck Roman was climbing outside.

THE murderer in the rocks, the other men with him, were never to know that a bullet had killed a hero, a working man who was doing his best to save those in the rocks, those at the light truck. He may have thought they were neighboring farmers.

The whole world seemed to shiver. The face of the marble cliff above the slag piles heaved with a gigantic convulsion. Chunks weighing countless tons broke off, heaving outward. From among these came hundreds of smaller slivers of hard marble, but big as great cannon.

Barbara Rand kept her eyes closed. This was the end. A chunk of marble struck the roof of the truck. The armored top quivered, bent inward. But the steel held. Pandemonium came with the blast. There were quick, short screams among Yanna's holdup mobsters in the rocks.

The girl's lips moved and she murmured.

"No blue wagon—only black—no blue wagon—"

Outside the truck, Truck Roman could see the sky filled for seconds with rising rain—a rain of tons of marble. The big mobster who had tortured the girl started to run. A sliver of the flintlike rock sliced off one of his arms at the shoulder.

The next caved in his skull. Too quick, that death.

CHAPTER X
WHISPERING DUNGEONS

BARBARA RAND had expected to die. She had known the four o'clock timing on the big weekly blast at Unity Marble Mines. Despite the horrible agony of torture, the gritty girl had matched her wits with her torturers.

Crulls Yanna and his killers had sought the time of delivery on some Unity Corporations payroll that could easily be knocked off. And the fair-haired girl had cleverly tricked them into the blast at the marble mine.

Having visited the quarry, she knew that when Yanna's truck stopped in the gash, with his men scattered below, they would be directly under the face of marble that would come off. And every mobster in the slag piles had died quickly.

It seemed impossible that the light truck could have remained without being totally crushed. But its armored top resisted the pounding of lighter pieces of marble. A dropping sliver glanced off the driver's roof and gashed Yanna's head. The mob leader was knocked back into the truck.

Of all the men who had come to attack the mine, Yanna was the lone survivor. Barbara Rand still lived. She was not bound, but for minutes she was too paralyzed to move. Then Crulls Yanna groaned and stirred.

The girl attempted to leave the truck, but for the moment her strength was unequal to it. She was well aware that death, or worse, would be her fate when the mob leader returned to consciousness. She rolled to one side of the truck.

Some black garment lay there. She pulled this quickly over her nearly stripped body. If she could only get out of the truck and hide! She had hardly been aware until this moment of the few bits of clothing left upon her.

Crulls Yanna groaned deeply. His hands waved as he fought back to his senses. Then suddenly he was on his hands and knees, facing the girl.

He uttered a terrible oath, and his eyes became red-rimmed with killing fury.

"You damned double-crosser!" he grated. "Well, you'll never live to talk about it! Too bad I haven't

a lot of time on my hands! I'd make it slow as hell if I did! But I've got to get away, so I'll do the best I can!"

YANNA had pulled a short-bladed knife into his hand. His purpose was obvious. Perhaps he would cut slowly, painfully, twisting the knife around. A blade thrust into and twisted in the human flesh is an effective weapon for torture.

Blood was oozing from Yanna's forehead, making his face hideous. The girl shrank to the side of the truck, clamping a hand to her mouth to prevent a scream. Why was the mob leader moving so slowly? Was he thus adding to the horror?

Then Barbara realized that Yanna was weak and still dazed. His body was refusing to respond to the fiendish dictate of his murderous brain. Somewhere outside came faint shouts. Perhaps the men from the marble mine office were coming toward the truck.

The girl made a desperate effort to move, wrapping the black garment around her. This proved to be a cloak topped by a black hood. She did not realize the similarity of this to her own black coat she had pulled over her head the night she had followed Crulls Yanna's mobsters.

The mob leader made a tremendous effort to drive himself forward. The voices outside were coming closer. But the fetid breath of the monster, his red, blazing eyes were over Barbara's face. His short blade lifted, and he struck.

But that heaving of his body overtaxed his returning strength, and he fell. The knife seared into the girl's arm, but not deeply. It had the effect of releasing her energy. Voices were shouting now, cursing.

Barbara Rand reached the back of the truck, threw herself out of the opened door. Amid all that death she made a weird figure. The cloak of the black hood was wrapped around her body.

She plunged directly into the arms of a long-nosed man.

Deputy Henry Bolton saw the black hood before he noted that it was around a girl's body. One of his hard fists struck at the head. Barbara Rand collapsed in his arms. Bolton ripped off the garment.

"That Rand dame!" he shouted. "Well, this is one that will teach Wildcat Gordon where he stands! We had her ready for the rap, and our wise commissioner turns her loose! She's the Black Hood!"

Barbara Rand could not deny this, for Bolton's bony fist had put her to sleep. Two others of Bolton's coppers were in the truck, dragging the body of Crulls Yanna into the open. When the mob leader shook his head, roared and plunged, one of the coppers let him have the butt of his revolver.

Deputy Bolton stared at the girl and the mob leader when they were laid on the ground. His small eyes glittered. He was more than one up on Wildcat Gordon. The greatest moment of his life had arrived!

While Wildcat was absenting himself on mysterious missions, he, the ambitious deputy, had the breaking of this case in his own ugly hands. And Deputy Bolton was doing some fast thinking. How could he best capitalize on his unexpected capture, as he believed, of the Black Hood?

Bolton was only set back by discovering the Black Hood apparently was not The Whisperer he hated. Yet who had ever seen The Whisperer? It might be that a girl could have used that awesome voice to disguise her sex.

That was Bolton's reasoning as the men from the marble mine crowded around the truck. But before they had reached it, Bolton had the girl and Yanna stowed away in his battered sedan. And Bolton had a shrewd idea. He would not permit the two prisoners to get into Wildcat Gordon's hands until he had third-degreed them to confessions and broke the case himself into the news headlines.

Only one of the marble-mine men had been killed. The coppers from the city checked on the bodies of the dead mobsters, identifying most of them quickly.

LESS than two hours later, the two battered cars hired by the police reached an outlying precinct of the big town. Handcuffs locked the wrists of Crulls Yanna and Barbara Rand together. Deputy Bolton had dismissed all but one of his coppers. He proceeded with the prisoners and this one man to a weed-grown district.

The battered old stone building with its planked doors had once been a police precinct station. The old seventy-ninth; it was built in a day when police methods were plenty tough. For there were slimy, windowless, barred dungeons under the old precinct building.

At times, Wildcat Gordon had employed these dungeons. Once a political boss had occupied one of the rat-infested cells. This boss had been a killing fiend.* Deputy Bolton had known nothing of this, but he did know the existence of the abandoned dungeons.

So Barbara Rand awoke in a swaying hammock. She was in opaque darkness. There was a slimy, chill feeling, as if she were in a grave. But there were sounds. Little noises. Terrible noises. Rats were squealing and scurrying about in the slime of the cell.

Barbara moved suddenly. The hammock overturned. The girl screamed as she fell to a stone floor, and she could almost feel the rats scurrying about her. If there had been light, it would have been reflected from scores of beady eyes.

The copper who had been brought there by Deputy Bolton was a survival of an earlier police regime. A man of slow wits, but great strength, he had been of great value in certain cases.

For when Detective Dayton started a third degree there never was a let-up until a prisoner had cracked. His methods were his own. His fists were hard, and he knew a hundred nerve-torturing holds.

As Barbara Rand struggled on the floor of the slimy cell, catching at rusty iron bars to pull herself away from the rats on the floor, she heard profane groans nearby.

Crulls Yanna had been awakened by sharp, torturing nips at exposed portions of his body. When he climbed to his feet, rats scurried away. The mob leader was groping about in his cell, blundering into walls and rusty bars.

A door opened somewhere and a faint light filtered along an underground passage. Feet slapped into slime as they came toward the cells. Rusty iron squealed, and Barbara Rand shrank back to the wall. She could only believe that she had again fallen into the hands of the mobsters.

Detective Dayton's face was heavy, scarred and brutal. He weighed two hundred pounds, and had long arms.

*As chronicled in *Murder Queens.*

"Do you come out, or do I bring you out?" he snarled.

Then the girl saw the long-nosed face of Henry Bolton, whom she knew as deputy commissioner of police.

"I'll come out," she said, in a trembling voice. "Oh, it's the police! I'm all right then. I'll tell you about everything!"

"Tell everything is right!" exploded Bolton. "Including the hideout you have been using as the Black Hood!"

Dayton's hard fingers caught the girl's slender wrist and yanked her toward him. His other hand slapped her face brutally. The dick believed in letting a prisoner know where he stood. His thumbnail prodded between tendons in the girl's wrist and forced a cry from her throat.

"But you don't understand! Please listen—"

"Out this way, moll, and then we'll listen!" ordered Dayton. "We ain't wastin' no time on any dame! We want the rest of your setup, and quick!"

Crulls Yanna heard this. The mob leader kept his head down and his mouth shut. He had known Detective Dayton of old. Let the damned dame who had tricked his men have her inning! It would not be sweet!

So they thought she was the Black Hood? Crulls Yanna himself did not know the identity of the Black Hood, who gave his orders from this effective mask. But he did know the Black Hood was not a woman.

THE room into which Barbara Rand was propelled had no windows and but one door. There was a single blazing light in the round ceiling. The walls bore old, dark stains. In past days many prisoners had been given their innings in that room, sessions that broke them, left them marked for life.

Dayton pushed the girl roughly into a wooden chair and pulled up another chair facing her. Deputy Bolton leaned against the wall. Bolton was not quite as brutal as he seemed, but he was a copper about to break a case that would make him tops in the newspapers. As the situation now stood between Wildcat Gordon and Deacon Fram, if not Big Fist Leffler, Bolton was convinced he had never had a better opportunity.

"I'll tell you about the blast," began Barbara. "You see, I was a pris—"

Bolton had heard nothing from Wildcat Gordon of this, and Big Fist Leffler had not known the girl who had been held.

"You'll tell us a lot more than that, you damned moll!"

Dayton's rough fingers gripped the girl's arms and twisted.

"The lowdown, baby! And fast! You've been headin' this murder mob! You've never been in on any actual killin's, but workin' inside of the Unity

Corporations to give out the tips on the pay rolls! Who have you got workin' for you among the screws in that upriver stir? Who are your swell friends on the parole board who have been turnin' cop killers loose on this town?"

The girl's eyes widened in bewilderment. She tried to speak.

Dayton's fingers became great claws sinking into one soft shoulder. It brought a scream of pain in spite of the girl's endurance.

"It's crazy—I tell you I've been fighting this mob —they had me—I sent them into that blast—there was no payroll at the Unity Marble Mine—I only—"

"Liar!" yelled Dayton, and slapped the girl's face.

"There was no payroll—" cried the girl.

"The payroll car came up just after the blast," stated Deputy Bolton. "None knew that, but someone inside the Unity Corporations office. So you will tell, or Detective Dayton will—"

Dayton's next twist of his fingers would have reduced a strong man to a quivering mass of humanity. The girl knew it was possible that the staggered system had really brought a pay roll to the marble mine. But now there was only excruciating pain to fight. She broke on a high, sobbing scream.

Deputy Bolton said, "I took this letter from your clothes. So you have been writing to Jack Hiley, a lifer. Maybe that's where your inside has been laid in the big house."

But the girl could only scream again and again. Dayton was twisting one shapely arm across her back.

He said, "You'll never use this hand again—"

The big light in the ceiling went out.

Deputy Bolton sprang toward the single, heavy door. It was unfortunate for him. A fist propelled by an arm as stiff as a ramrod broke Deputy Bolton's nose and lifted him from his feet. A second blow took him to his knees.

Bolton was strong and could take it. He lashed out. He felt his own knuckles sink into flesh low on a man's stomach. It brought a hissing grunt. A broad-toed shoe jammed upward in the darkness. Bolton's teeth clicked together as his head went back.

As Bolton hit the floor, Detective Dayton bellowed and sprang away from the girl. Dayton was a canny fighter. He knew he had as much advantage as the unseen attackers. His trick was to get to the wall, keeping low down and holding his gun ready, waiting for a sound.

Bolton was completely out. For half a minute, there was only the girl's sobbing breath. Dayton got an idea. It was risky, but it might work. He believed for the moment that the invader of the third-degree room could be none other than some aide of the Black Hood.

In this much at least, Detective Dayton was honest. He was acting upon the belief that Barbara Rand was the Black Hood. Now he took a long chance, moving his heavy body as he did it.

"Back out, damn you! Or I'll let the girl have it! I can't miss, and I'll blast the hell out of your Black Hood!"

A HISSING, eerie whisper filled the space of the room. Dayton had hoped to evoke speech from the invader. He was all set to shoot at the sound of voice or movement. But his revolver only waved in circles. That chilling whisper might have come from anywhere in the room.

"Stand where you are, Dayton, or you die! The Whisperer speaks! And I am the Black Hood!"

It was the awesome whisper that paralyzed the big detective. Held him frozen. If he had intended to pound bullets into the girl's soft body, his muscles refused to respond.

But The Whisperer was gliding through the darkness. He possessed an almost supernatural instinct for small sounds. In this sudden silence, he could hear Dayton's heavy breathing. He could hear the ticking of his watch.

The Whisperer aimed a fist at the sound. He did not wish to kill one of his own detectives. Now The Whisperer was a small man beside the huge dick, and Dayton had no compunction whatever about shooting. As bunched knuckles drove his head into the wall, he lifted his revolver and started it booming.

The flashing powder burned The Whisperer's face. He had never been in a tighter spot. He could employ only blows, trickery against the big man's gun. A bullet burned his shoulder.

The Whisperer aimed another blow in the darkness, and his fist was like a battering ram driven into Dayton's stomach.

There was reason, perhaps several reasons why The Whisperer had been named "Wildcat." Dayton was finding out several of these reasons. Something like closing jaws of a vise hooked into his thick neck. Another hand shot downward and caught under one leg.

Though he attempted to get his gun into play, Dayton went flying in a headforemost dive. He landed on the stone floor. The Whisperer turned and drove toward the detective. Two seconds later it was over. A sapper removed Detective Dayton from the picture.

The Whisperer wasted no time getting the much-tortured girl into his arms.

"Who are you? You said you were the Black Hood," sobbed the girl.

"That doesn't matter," said The Whisperer huskily. "No person ever sees my face. So—"

Tape slapped over Barbara's eyes and her mouth. She was lifted in strong arms. Detective Dayton lay where he had fallen. The Whisperer released the girl

The Whisperer's broad-toed shoe jammed upward in the darkness. Bolton's teeth clicked together as his head went back.

long enough to pull Deputy Bolton's coat from his limp figure. He wrapped this around the girl.

Outside, in the seat of a car, Barbara Rand heard the husky voice again. "Stay here if you want to escape," it instructed. "Jim Duval may soon be out of the big house. Do you know the Black Hood?"

The girl said, "I'll stay here. I don't know the Black Hood. I have been trying to find him, but he seems like a ghost. Possibly there is no Black Hood. Oh, can anyone help Jim Duval? I love him so!"

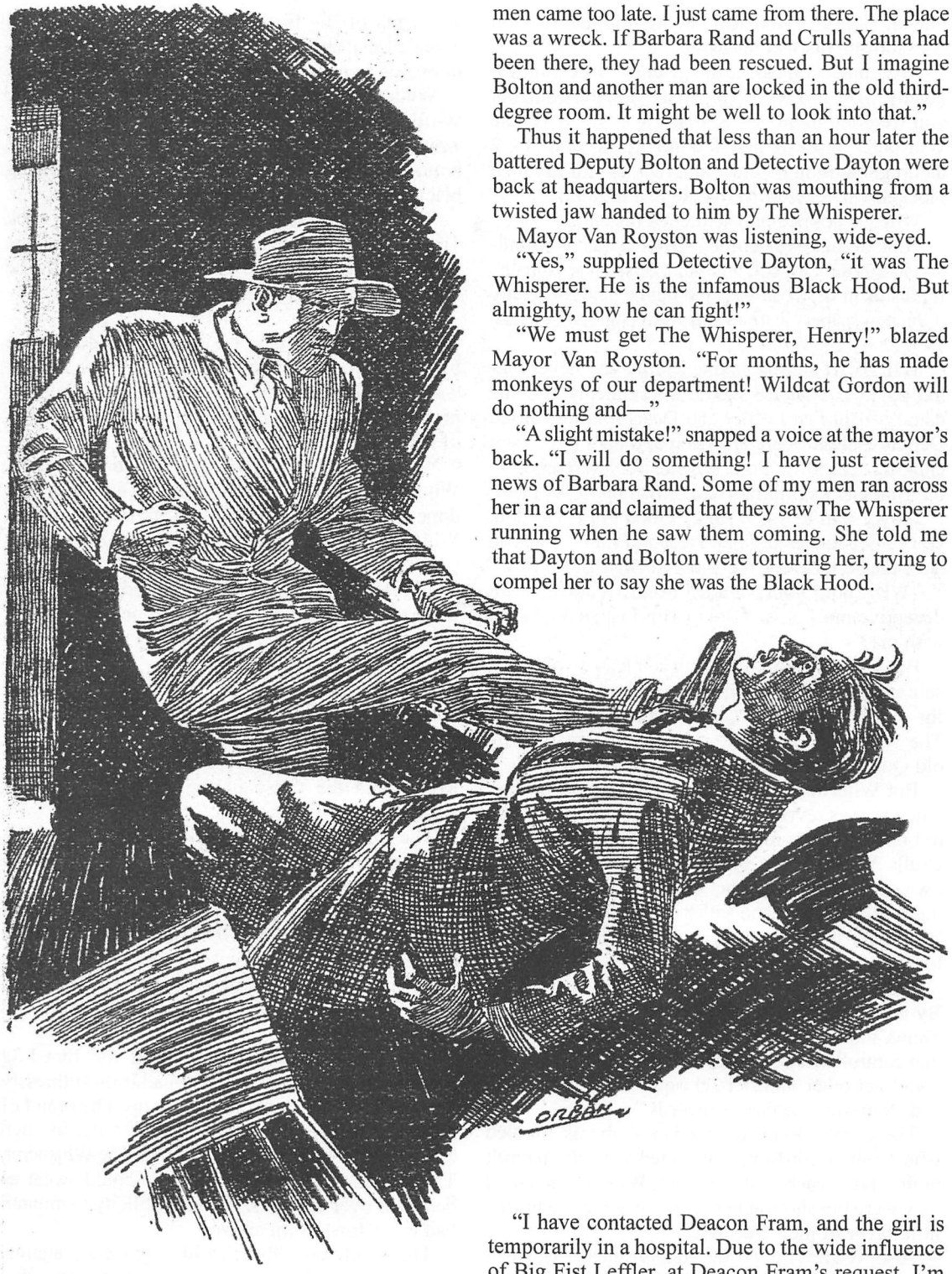
The Whisperer did not reply. The girl had the feeling there was some other person at the wheel of the car, but she did not speak.

The Whisperer was back in the seventy-ninth precinct dungeons. He put in no time taping the eyes of the mobster Crulls Yanna. Walking back to the lightless dungeon, he opened the creaking door. As Yanna stepped close he let him have a single knockout blow.

Back in the old main room of the station, The Whisperer locked the door of the third-degree room. It was a door that not even the bullet from a revolver could blast. Deputy Bolton and Detective Dayton would escape only by chance.

CHAPTER XI
HILEY'S STRANGE HEROISM

THE WHISPERER stepped from the car bearing Barbara and Crulls Yanna and went into a drugstore.



His dental plate was removed in a phone booth. He called headquarters.

"O.K., Sergeant Thorsen," he said. "I got your message that Bolton had taken two prisoners to the old dungeons. But the tip you got from one of the men came too late. I just came from there. The place was a wreck. If Barbara Rand and Crulls Yanna had been there, they had been rescued. But I imagine Bolton and another man are locked in the old third-degree room. It might be well to look into that."

Thus it happened that less than an hour later the battered Deputy Bolton and Detective Dayton were back at headquarters. Bolton was mouthing from a twisted jaw handed to him by The Whisperer.

Mayor Van Royston was listening, wide-eyed.

"Yes," supplied Detective Dayton, "it was The Whisperer. He is the infamous Black Hood. But almighty, how he can fight!"

"We must get The Whisperer, Henry!" blazed Mayor Van Royston. "For months, he has made monkeys of our department! Wildcat Gordon will do nothing and—"

"A slight mistake!" snapped a voice at the mayor's back. "I will do something! I have just received news of Barbara Rand. Some of my men ran across her in a car and claimed that they saw The Whisperer running when he saw them coming. She told me that Dayton and Bolton were torturing her, trying to compel her to say she was the Black Hood.

"I have contacted Deacon Fram, and the girl is temporarily in a hospital. Due to the wide influence of Big Fist Leffler, at Deacon Fram's request, I'm compelled to suspend Deputy Bolton and Detective Dayton!"

Wildcat's army hat was pulled jauntily over one eye as he strode from the doorway to his desk and sat down. He passed up the sudden protests of the

mayor. Henry Bolton was saying nothing. Dayton was shifting his feet uneasily.

"You made a mess of this, Henry," said Wildcat quietly. "The girl was trying to tell you the truth, but you were too dumb to see that it was so. Why The Whisperer rescued her, I don't know. But it's a damn good thing he did—and luckier still my men blocked whatever objective he had in mind."

Wildcat stopped and scratched his chin.

"Use of the third degree," he went on, "is forbidden in this department, unless I oversee it personally. It puts us in very bad with the public, and especially if the newspapers learn of this from Big Fist Leffler."

WILDCAT puffed smoke calmly and never batted an eye. That he should so suddenly use the name of Big Fist Leffler and Deacon Fram caused Deputy Bolton to breathe deep and hard to prevent choking. His own little scheme for preference in the Black Hood killings had blown up in his face.

Mayor Van Royston said, "Good grief! Gordon, you're not suggesting that Deacon Fram—that you have the nerve to use the name of Big Fist Leffler?"

"Why not, your honor?" said Wildcat, with deceptive meekness. "Didn't Big Fist shake hands with me?"

But Wildcat Gordon was not so pleased with himself as he seemed. The girl was indeed being cared for in a hospital. And Crulls Yanna was in one of The Whisperer's underworld hideouts, guarded by old Quick Trigger and the terrier, Brian Boru.

But Wildcat had become convinced that Yanna, when he was revived, told the truth when he said he did not know the identity of the Black Hood. And Crulls Yanna was a broken, beaten mobster. His own department might not employ the third degree, but with a man of the killer stamp of Yanna, The Whisperer could think of more ways than Dayton to make him talk.

Now Wildcat Gordon was not entirely blocked. By the heroism of a mere girl, most of the Crulls Yanna mob had been wiped out. But with power that controlled a State parole board, the Black Hood could get other mobsters cheaply enough. Wildcat had examined the parole records.

There had been some other convicts paroled who seemed not to be connected with the payroll mob. And in each of these cases, Wildcat had noted they were big shots able to pay a fancy price for the little favor of their freedom.

Also, Wildcat fully believed this same Black Hood was an enemy of Unity Corporations, especially of Big Fist Leffler himself.

Who was the Black Hood? This question had become the paramount issue with Wildcat Gordon. Suspicion of Barbara Rand had, of course, been entirely eliminated. The girl had every reason to be an enemy of Big Fist Leffler, for it had now been revealed that she knew the head of Unity Corporations was responsible for Jack Hiley being in prison.

Wildcat drove back to his hideout. There he swiftly put Crulls Yanna in such position that he would keep for many hours. Not only was he bound, but the Scottish terrier with the glittering black eyes was given his orders to guard the mobster.

Wildcat achieved this by signaling to Quick Trigger and having him perform the service. As The Whisperer, he had kept Yanna's eyes taped. Now he did not wish Yanna to identify him in any way.

WITH Quick Trigger beside him, Wildcat drove back across town. The older man was greatly worried. Wildcat had not yet made good his promise to make a personal call upon the Big Four of the parole board.

"You're not goin' through with that, are you, Wildcat?" asked Quick Trigger. "They have the dope readin' against you. If you are trapped as The Whisperer up the river, the whole political gang will be on your neck."

Wildcat grinned. Newspaper headlines did not favor any luck for The Whisperer if he were caught. There was now a long list of crimes chalked up to him.

The Whisperer had killed Joe Lorton, a paroled man who apparently had committed no crime, and shipped him back to the parole board.

He was proclaimed as the slayer of Lug Slanton, Roller, and the cause of the supposed death of Attorney Jacklin.

The disappearance of Jacklin after being shot was considered evidence that The Whisperer had committed that second crime.

And in the Lug Slanton case, the publicity gag had been clamped down. Though Attorney Jacklin had been a criminal lawyer, widely known as a crook mouthpiece, his disappearance made good copy. But the best of the headlines had been the old human interest stuff.

For all that the reporters learned was that Lug Slanton and his "aged mother" had been ruthlessly shot. A few sob sisters played this up. The brand of writers employed to turn on public tears in such cases. That was a strong count against The Whisperer. The hardboiled, but honest warden could swear as he might over the facts, but the publicity command had comedown from above.

Then had come the clinching evidence against The Whisperer: had he not announced to Detective Dayton that he himself was the Black Hood?

And as the Black Hood had he not rescued the notorious Crulls Yanna?

The third degree of Barbara Rand was played down in this story. It was made to appear that the

girl had merely been rescued by Henry Bolton in the massacre of the marble mine, and that The Whisperer had strangely been forced to release her when he rescued Yanna.

These were the facts before the public. Good reason for the hue and cry of the newshounds to be raised against the police, against the failure of Wildcat Gordon to cope with an unprecedented wave of crime.

The Whisperer, publicly shown to be a super-murderer, must be seized.

And now Wildcat Gordon was calmly planning his deferred call upon the members of the parole board. He had evolved a daring plan to learn the true identity of the Black Hood, but he did not divulge this to Quick Trigger.

Their coupé came to Quick Trigger's loft building penthouse, which sat on the West River waterfront. Here Wildcat signified that he was continuing on his way.

"You will rest up, Quick Trigger," he advised. "Then I want you to keep a close eye upon Barbara Rand. I have had a talk with Big Fist Leffler. You are to become a sort of watchman or janitor in the Unity Corporations building. Chiefly, you are to keep an eye on the Rand girl. Deacon Fram, as old as he is, seems to have fallen for the girl."

Wildcat disregarded Quick Trigger's grumbled protest. Then the older man evinced more interest when Wildcat added another note:

"I believe there is something in Big Fist's office that Barbara Rand wants badly. And if she attempts to get it, perhaps you can aid her. It would be just like Big Fist Leffler to keep old papers that might show some of his fortune was built upon money that belonged to Jack Hiley. And there might even be something that would turn up more on the murder of which Jack Hiley was convicted."

Neither man at the moment could know that this suggestion was to lead to a direct accusation of murder against Barbara Rand.

Leaving Quick Trigger, Wildcat Gordon made swift changes in his appearance. His gaudy raiment disappeared. When his coupé crossed the State line, the gray-clad man known in many places as humble D. Smith was at the wheel.

The Whisperer was striking directly into the heart of the enemy territory. He was planning a long and lonely vigil. He was seeking the voice of the real Black Hood, and he planned to snatch it from the air.

IT was the day following the conversation between Wildcat and Quick Trigger. During the early morning hours a coupé had been hidden in thick woods. This grove lay on a hillside above a cleared estate. The estate was a valuable property. Perhaps it represented too much wealth to be in the hands of a member of the prison parole board.

For the rambling house below the grove belonged to the man named Maten, undoubtedly the leader of the Big Four of the parole board.

The Whisperer himself was well concealed. He had a few sandwiches in his pockets. The thing he was waiting for might come today, tonight, or tomorrow. But when it came, The Whisperer would be waiting with the earphones clamped over the whitish-gray blur of his hair.

Before daylight a thin line of wire had been run for more than half a mile through concealing brush. This wire was connected down the pole of a private telephone line leading into the home of Maten, head of the Big Four.

The Whisperer was certain that recent events would bring something over that wire. Perhaps the time had arrived to free Jack Hiley. The growing list of crimes, the publicity, made it imperative that the man who had nursed revenge for years should be turned loose.

That is, if the theory held that the Black Hood was the enemy that Big Fist Leffler and Deacon Fram had announced him to be.

AND while The Whisperer stretched his tired body in hiding, ready for every conversation that might go over Maten's private line, other gray-clad men were moving to the dull routine of the day. The convicts in the downriver prison were marching in close step from the big dining room to the excelsior plant.

There the gray men would take up the gray day. Already the shaving machines were beginning to pound. In the wood-dusted plant, for eight hours most of these men would stand before machines that sent shaving bars up and down with rhythmic monotony.

Jim Duval marched in the line. Though he had agreed to Wildcat Gordon's plan to be returned as a stoolie to the prison, hope had quickly faded in the young man's heart. His tall figure drooped a little.

He had achieved only one thing: the man marching before him had bowed, powerful shoulders. His hair was gray. His face was gray. His brown eyes were dull and hopeless. For years this man, "Old Jack," his fellow cons called him—he was Jack Hiley—had been marching to and from this spirit-breaking job.

Now the line split off at the entrance to the factory building. Sullen men, hard-eyed men, drooping men, some with the desperation of animals in traps, moved to their places before the shaving machines.

Like the other spiritless, furtive or watchfully beginning convicts, Jim Duval and Jack Hiley stood before their machines. They were awaiting the signal whistle that would start the slicing of wooden blocks. A shaving of endless cords of wood into the hairlike excelsior used for packing.

None of the men attempted to speak from slanted mouths now. Later, they would converse under cover of the pounding machines.

A shrill whistle blew. The screws or guards moved into places where they could command each row of men with their rifles. There, under the threat of the guns, the day's work had begun.

Each man picked up a block of wood, placed it under the shaver and set the slicing knife going. Up

and down moved the knife. Excelsior rolled off into the boxes. Each con must watch his machine. When a block was shaved, the con reached back for another and put it in place.

For eight hours it would go on like that. The damnable knife moving up and down. If it could but be a weapon in the hand of the con! But, no. It was only a pounding thing, inanimate, yet alive, pounding upon his brain. A new block each two minutes. Thirty blocks an hour. Two hundred and forty blocks a day. For days, for weeks, for years.

Never a letup in that ceaselessly moving machinery. Unless a knife broke. Two thousand men stood, hoping for knives to break, for that brief event when a mechanic, under close guard, would come and change the tools.

Up and down. Hundreds of blocks. Millions of blocks over the years. Hundreds of millions of hammering impacts each minute. Damn that screw! If only a broken knife could be forgotten where a fellow could get his hands upon it!

Jack Hiley's eyes were fixed straight ahead. Brown eyes, like those of Barbara Rand. Looking odd under his snow-white hair. Years and years he had been placing blocks in the machines. Years and years, until the vengeance that kept him alive became a part of his hammered soul.

HILEY glanced sidewise at Jay Grogan, the screw he hated most of all. Once Grogan had caused Jack Hiley to spend ten days in the "black hole." The black hole where there was no light. Bread and water for food. Days in the hospital afterward to build him up so he could go back to the pounding, damnable machines.

The men could talk now. It was permitted. Talk with their eyes fixed ahead, so that no movement might be taken as the beginning of revolt.

Jim Duval said, "You've spent all these years to get out only to commit another murder? To come back and sit in the chair with your pants slit and your head shaved? Perhaps, any time you might have a parole."

"Parole? Hell, me? Never!" gritted Jack Hiley. "That screw Grogan has kept me on the black list too long! But it will be about three years now, and they will have to take me before the board! Then—"

"Men change a lot," said Jim Duval. "I wouldn't do it, Jack. Is there no reason, no one outside, that would make you change your mind?"

"Nobody! There was—but it killed her! Like I'm going to kill him! The chair? Don't make me laugh, young fellow! I'll not go to the chair, ever! There will be nothing to live for, so I'll—"

Jay Grogan, the pale-eyed screw with a rifle, came walking along. His gaze was slanted on Duval and Hiley. They ceased speaking. It seemed as if he were listening, trying to find more against the con he hated.

Then they talked again.

"Jordan, my cellmate, is talking about a break," stated Jim Duval. "I may have a chance at parole in a year or so, so I want to keep out of it."

Jack Hiley said from the corner of his mouth, "You keep out of it, young fellow! You've got your life to live! Stay out of any break! You'd only lose! They cut your guts out with the choppers, or you'd come back to stay for years like me—shriveling up inside! Keep out of a break, you hear? You can't win!"

A funny conversation. Jim Duval trying to prevent the old convict from committing another murder, because he knew him to be the father of the girl who held his own heart. He could not tell Jack Hiley that. Not that.

Jack Hiley raging against this young fellow he liked, because he wanted him to have a chance to live the years ahead of him. Never knowing the truth. That his own daughter outside loved Jim Duval.

The knives pounded. Up and down. Up and down. The cons standing there, moving countless blocks of wood under the knives.

Then it happened. An outbreak always came like that. From a trivial incident. A knife broke. The machine stopped. Jay Grogan guarded a mechanic who came with a new knife.

A hard-eyed convict, Raney, stood before the broken machine. Grogan seemed to overlook a broken sliver of the steel knife taken from the machine. Raney's hand crept toward the weapon. It could be as deadly as a dagger. Raney had quarreled violently with Browder, the convict working at the machine beside him.

Perhaps Jay Grogan had deliberately helped foment that quarrel. It seemed strange that Grogan should have turned his back at that particular instant.

Jack Hiley was talking again to Jim Duval.

"And there's the Black Hood tickets out," said Jack Hiley. "Don't you let any of 'em talk you into one. Some of the screws are in on them. You have heard what has happened?"

Jim Duval nodded. He had heard all that had happened. Jack Hiley did not know he was here because of a Black Hood murder. He had kept that from him as he had his knowledge of Barbara. Barbara, waiting outside for her father. Waiting now for two men. For Jim Duval and her father.

"You keep clean, young fellow, like you look," said old Jack Hiley. "Stay away from Grogan. That screw's in with the Black Hood. I have all the inside on that."

"You're doing a good job of hating Grogan, Jack," said Duval. "That may keep you in—"

The thing that was happening stopped Jim Duval's words. Raney had that broken sliver of knife. He plunged suddenly upon Browder, the convict beside him. The sliver was driven between the other man's shoulders.

Browder screamed, turned upon the jagged steel, that must have touched his heart. Turned and faced the hating eyes of the man who had killed him, gurgling blood from his mouth.

GROGAN, the screw, made a funny move. He could have shot Raney then, but he sidestepped, blowing a shrill whistle. There was an immediate surging of men away from their machines. Another convict screamed, but it was the unleashed years of the pounding machines coming from his throat.

Raney caught up a block of the excelsior wood. He threw it at the head of the nearest guard, yelling, "Get the screws! Come on!"

A rifle cracked and a convict sagged over, one arm falling under the pounding knife of his own machine. Blood spurted. The convict was dead with a bullet in his heart. Raney jerked the knife out of Browder and permitted the corpse to fall.

Raney shouted, "Damn you, Grogan, you're next!"

He dived with the bloody knife thrusting at Grogan. The screw was quick, but Jim Duval was quicker. His lanky, hardened body catapulted along the aisle, knocking Grogan out of the way of the lunging knife.

Raney cursed vilely. Jim Duval's fist caught him under one ear and lifted him clear of the floor. Jim hit the crazed con again before he could recover. Raney was knocked past the fallen Grogan, straight into Jack Hiley's arms.

Now Old Jack probably would have made no move to save Grogan. Nor would he have intervened in any other way. He had been in the black hole. You do not take any chances on going back down there, if you are smart. Nor do you incur the enmity of your fellow cons by helping any screw.

But Jack Hiley's fingers locked on Raney's knife wrist as the con hit him. It doubtless was an instinctive act of self-preservation, twisting the sliver of broken knife from the maddened convict's hand.

Grogan lifted to his feet. Old Jack Hiley dropped the murder blade on the floor at Grogan's feet. He turned back to his machine without a word. Other guards were holding the cons. The machines stopped pounding.

The thing that happened was incredible. Jay Grogan's thick lips wore a hard smile. He said the last thing that would have been expected.

"Thanks for that, Jack! It saved my life! I won't forget it when the report goes in!"

Grogan turned upon Duval. His rifle was pushed into Duval's stomach.

"Turn around, punk!" he rapped out. "You knocked me down, and Raney would have used that shiv on me if Old Jack hadn't got it! You'll go back to your cell! There'll be a hearing tomorrow, and you'll maybe get the black hole for this!"

"Damn you, Grogan!" roared Old Jack. "What the hell you framing on this young fellow? You know he—"

"Forget it, Jack!" snapped Grogan. "I know it's the thing for you to do to ease up the rap for him! Well, seeing you saved my life, maybe I'll forget the black hole! But he goes back to his cell until I think it over. And you'll go to yours. I think maybe the warden will want to see you!"

Old Jack Hiley locked his lips. What the hell! Whatever the frame—and he knew the whole damned works must be that—it might take off a few months of the time he would have to wait to even the score with Big Fist Leffler. But it put Jim Duval on the spot.

"Stay out of that break, young fellow," grated Jack Hiley from a corner of his mouth as they were marched out.

CHAPTER XII
VOICE FROM THE AIR

JIM DUVAL tried to unscramble his thoughts when he was back in his cell. His mate, Jordan, was at work in another part of the prison. All this cell block was empty now, except for Jim and Old Jack Hiley. Their cells were too far apart for conversation.

Because of the crowded condition of the down-river prison, this was but a single cell block of twenty doors. It had been built into what had been a storehouse to take care of the overflow.

Jordan, Duval's cellmate, was a tough egg. He was already a three-time loser. He was in now for second-degree murder. He had killed an old man during a holdup. The crime had been brutal, and it should have been first degree.

But Jordan had pull. The rap had been reduced. And Jordan was still alive to plan another murder. It would have to be, if he hoped to make the break he planned. There was but one guard on this small cell block. Every night the prison chaplain came walking along.

Jordan had to take Jim Duval in on his plan if he hoped to succeed. He had to assure himself that at least Duval would not interfere. Nevertheless, Jim Duval had been planning to do just that. He could not feel it would be against the prison code for him to prevent a murder.

Just now Jim Duval's thoughts were bitter, indeed. He had become doubtful of the influence of Wildcat Gordon. Any man becomes skeptical of his chances, of the good will of the police, once the iron doors have clanged.

Jim sat on the edge of his bunk and pieced together what had happened. Now he recalled that Grogan, the screw, had appeared to engender the row between Raney and Browder that had cased the killing. Grogan could have shot Raney down, Jim believed.

Then what the hell was all this? Why had Old Jack Hiley so suddenly been placed in the role of hero against his will? Jim's brain seethed. It evolved an idea.

"The Black Hood," he muttered. "Old Jack said Grogan is one of the Black Hood's screws. That means—"

Jim knew what it meant. He had been informed that Barbara was working directly in Big Fist Leffler's office. He had been told that the Black Hood was an enemy of Big Fist, and that he might only be waiting to free Jack Hiley for his own purpose.

That purpose would be the murder of Big Fist Leffler.

Jim thought, "If I could only talk, tell what I know! But I can't do that. Maybe the warden himself is in on this. Maybe the governor."

The prison grapevine had been sufficient to inform him that in some way the governor was involved in the amazing paroles being issued.

Anything he might say would be used to extend his term. Duval was at this minute very doubtful of Wildcat Gordon's ability to get him out, now that he was in. The commitment had been easily arranged through a judge.

But would Wildcat Gordon discover enough to help him? If he could get word of what had happened. But he knew that would be impossible.

Jim Duval's doubt of Wildcat Gordon's ability to "get in under" might have been relieved shortly after noon this same day.

THE WHISPERER, safely concealed, the earphones clamped to his head, had dozed. He was asleep. Then someone was talking into a dream. He snapped awake. Words were going over the private telephone line of Maten, the crooked head of the Big Four.

Maten's voice: "I don't know if we dare to do it. Joe Lorton and this Lug Slanton. It has us on a spot."

Another voice: "Don't forget there are other spots, Maten! I'm passing the word to Fultz and Spratt and Danvers. They also have other spots. You damned fool, the governor himself is on another spot! I thought that you understood that, that I am ready to blow the top off at any time! And if you try to squeal, that will only cinch all of you for life!"

So that was the way it was! The Whisperer had been sure it would be. The Black Hood had the Big Four of the parole board, the governor himself, where the hair was short. All five were politicians. What sins they may have committed were not revealed.

But if there was such a thing as hearing a man sweat, The Whisperer heard it now.

Maten's voice: "This may ruin all of us, cost us our places!"

The other voice: "Well, and if it should, you've already had your gravy. Much better that way than that you put on gray suits yourselves and start contributing to the world's supply of excelsior. Now get this: You hold a special meeting tomorrow. Grogan's put his end across."

Maten's voice: "Everything went all right?"

"Slick as grease. Old Jack Hiley's coming out of stir, but he doesn't know it yet. He hated Grogan, and that makes it better. Grogan will recommend him on his heroism in saving his life. It almost slipped when that damned Jim Duval butted in, but it worked out. We will take care of Duval on the inside."

Maten's voice : "I will see that Ganrow calls the meeting. He'll kick like hell, but it will be called. I have something of my own on Ganrow. Tomorrow afternoon we will parole Jack Hiley."

"That's better, and after that I'll call you for a final settlement. I give you my word everything will be over that I want."

A double click. The Whisperer removed the earphones. Not once had the name of the other man been spoken. But he knew it could be no other than the Black Hood himself. And The Whisperer had heard that voice before, many times.

The Whisperer pulled and the wire snapped loose. A little later, his coupé glided from the grove of trees.

The voice of the Black Hood! Here was something that would stand all of the underworld on its ear. It might do more. The Black Hood had said that he might call his Big Four of the parole board together for a final split after this parole.

THE WHISPERER himself was not a good imitator of voices. But old Quick Trigger was a born mimic when it came to that. He could even impersonate The Whisperer over a telephone or in the darkness. And Quick Trigger had only to be told who the Black Hood was and the rest would be simple.

The Whisperer was unaware of the details of the prison plot that had been mentioned by the Black Hood. Something that a screw called Grogan had framed up. This was another revelation. It made clear how triggermen had been selected for jobs on the outside, then freed by the parole board.

As for the rest of it, The Whisperer, or rather Wildcat Gordon, knew of that within a short time. He was back in his office when Sergeant Thorsen spread an extra edition on his desk:

MURDERER BECOMES HERO!

In three minutes, Wildcat Gordon had digested the contents of the story. The part that a convict, known as Jim Duval, had played in the small revolt was not giving Jim any the best of it. It was related that he had hit Jay Grogan, a guard, knocking him down, but that Jack Hiley had saved the guard.

Wildcat Gordon made a wry grimace. Tough on Jim Duval. Tough on Barbara Rand.

"They've sure been taking it," muttered Wildcat. "If anyone in the world has something coming to them, that pair of kids is both of them."

Wildcat had little sentiment. His ungrammatical outburst was surprising. It meant that he would be behind Jim Duval in a big way as soon as the clouds cleared. But in the meantime, he was framing the scheme that would prevent more murders and involve several persons in a web that would be hard to break.

Wildcat's first thought jumped to Crulls Yanna, a prisoner in his own hideout. Then he picked up the telephone and called the Unity Corporations building. Yes, Quick Trigger was on duty. And Quick Trigger had a word for him.

"That gritty little devil Barbara Rand left the hospital this mornin' an' showed up on the job here," said Quick Trigger. "She recognized me. Her hands were bandaged. But she's hell-bent on gettin' to the files in Big Fist's office. She thinks she can spot them so I can break them tomorrow night."

"Hellamighty!" grated Wildcat. "Things are shaping up fast! It's beginning to look like a real big homecoming is being arranged for Jack Hiley! But I want you to meet me at the hideout in the next half hour. I want you to do a little impersonation for Crulls Yanna. When he hears the voice of the mug I have in mind, and is told he has been double-crossed by the Black Hood, he'll be just dumb enough to hit the ceiling."

"Goshamighty, Wildcat!" exploded Quick Trigger. "Me imitate a voice I never heard? It ain't ever—"

"You've heard it many times, Quick Trigger. Even though it was somewhat disguised, I recognized it. Meet me at the hideout. When you imitate the man I name, Yanna will be in no doubt but that we know the Black Hood. And then you tape his eyes, and The Whisperer will tell him where he stands—that the Black Hood has been caught and ratted on him."

ONE other man was staring at the "MURDERER BECOMES HERO" headline. His big hands were shaking. Even his bulging chin and forehead could not conceal that he was shaken.

"Great heavens, Deacon!" he exclaimed. "That means—say, Jack Hiley will be out of stir in less time than it takes to—"

"It looks that way, Big Fist," said Deacon Fram, a look of worry on his face. "I don't know, but maybe you had better duck for cover until some way is found to take care of Hiley. He will come out with nothing, and we might be able to buy him off."

Big Fist Leffler groaned. He was a fighter all the way through. But life was still sweet at sixty. He seemed convinced he had no chance to live if Jack Hiley were freed. For Big Fist's mind carried him into the past. The murder on the yacht. The arrests. The testimony in court.

Jack Hiley had not been the killer. Big Fist knew the blood of that was on his own hands. But he had had an easy conscience in those easy days, and he had been unscrupulous.

"I can't leave, Deacon," he said tensely. "Jack Hiley would follow me to the ends of the Earth. He cannot be bought off. I know Jack. There must be some other way. Some way to take care of him before he has a chance to get away from the prison."

"We might try the governor of the State," suggested Deacon Fram. "But it has looked as if he is aligned with this parole racket some way."

"That's it—that's it!" exclaimed Big Fist. "We'll make the governor see it! If we only knew the Black Hood! But we have made so many enemies, Deacon! So many enemies! It might be any—"

"One of several hundred," said Deacon Fram dryly. "But I'll get the governor for you."

Neither saw Barbara Rand as she passed behind one of the many tall filing cases. She went into the outer office and sat down white-faced. Her father, whom she had never seen, was about to be set free. The papers had caused her heart to sink when they told of Jim Duval's new trouble.

Now this! The girl had heard all the conversation. So Big Fist had been the murderer. Her father had served the best years of his life for a crime he never had committed.

Barbara Rand opened her handbag. A blue automatic was snuggled into it. But when Deacon Fram came out of Big Fist's office and gave her a worried sidelong glance, she was sorting some papers on her desk.

Deacon Fram suggested that Barbara should take the rest of the day off. He had more than his romantic interest in that. None could say what might come crashing down in the office with the imminence of her father's release. Better to have her away.

The girl accepted the suggestion quickly. She went downstairs, seeking old Quick Trigger. He must know about this. Perhaps the old ex-deputy and Wildcat Gordon would find some way to act.

Barbara was sick with despair when she learned that Quick Trigger had been called from the building only a few minutes before. Again she glanced at the automatic in her handbag. At that moment, in the white heat of her discovery, it is likely that only the absence of Quick Trigger prevented her from taking hasty action.

For she was convinced more than ever now there were papers in Big Fist's files that she must have. She would wait.

IN the meantime, Jack Hiley had been summoned from the storehouse cell block. He had gone in and stood before the keen-eyed warden while his worst enemy among the prison guards related what had happened in the excelsior plant.

"You would recommend that Jack Hiley be taken before the parole board, Grogan?" said the warden. "It seemed to me that you never were friends."

"Well, he saved my life, and that's something," growled Grogan.

Jack Hiley kept his lips locked. The revenge he had waited years to achieve might lie in this. Old Jack felt sorry for Jim Duval, but the word of Grogan would be taken before his own. Well, let it be that way.

When he was brought back into the cell block, he knew he would appear before a special session of the parole hoard on the following day.

Jordan said to Jim Duval, "You see how it is. You never get the breaks unless you make them. Jack Hiley's getting his ticket, and you're getting the tough end. Old Jack will leave tomorrow."

CHAPTER XIII
THE HUMAN SHIELDS

WHEN the parole board held its special meeting the next day, the word had already come down from the governor's office. Maten knew it. His three colleagues of the Big Four knew it. And this time, said the word from the governor's office, public opinion would be with the board.

For avid newspaper reporters had dug up some of the past history of Old Jack Hiley, though they had failed to connect him with Big Fist Leffler in a forgotten era. If the editors had gone more carefully into files of twenty years before, it might have been different.

But editions were hot now. A lifer, as they called Old Jack, had saved the life of a guard who had been his enemy. The governor had seen to it that this was played up. Also, the governor had wanted to know specifically why Big Fist Leffler had called his office seeking a delay in a parole for the day's public hero.

Deacon Fram could only say for Big Fist Leffler that Jack Hiley had been a business enemy, and there had been threats. If the governor suspected the truth, it would have meant nothing. An attempt to dig up a crime of a score of years before against the head of the powerful Unity Corporations would not have been good politics, even had it been possible.

There would be no witnesses. Old Jack Hiley had been convicted and had served years of his sentence. Demerits on bad conduct had extended the time when Hiley would have legally gone before the board.

No doubt, the governor's office was largely influenced by the statement, the threat and the promise of a final settlement from the Black Hood. To achieve this and at the same time put the parole board in better odor with the public at one stroke was too strong for even Big Fist Leffler to delay.

Silent Jack Hiley stood before the parole board. In a surprisingly few minutes, he heard the words uttered that meant he was to walk from the prison gates within an hour. The gates he had entered so many years before. What he might do in the outside world did not concern this one parole bird.

Kill! Kill! Kill!

This was all that hammered in his brain. The

pounding strokes of years of slicing knives on blocks of wood. Slicing away his lifetime, his manhood. Leaving but the dry kernel of his revenge.

Kill Big Fist Leffler! Kill him slowly! Make him suffer some of what he had suffered! If he could but have Big Fist a prisoner somewhere for days where he might inflict torture! The slicing strokes of the pounding knives!

These were Old Jack Hiley's only thoughts. And Jim Duval, who saw him leave the storehouse cell block, knew it to be so. No action had been taken on his own case. He had not utterly lost faith in Wildcat Gordon, but the blow that would give Barbara a lifetime of bitter memory was about to fall.

Jordan, Jim's cellmate, was a slack-mouthed youth. His eyes held the smoldering stupidity of an animal that kills for the sake of killing. But Jim Duval said to Jordan, "If you'll promise me there will be no killing, I'll join you in a break. But it must be that way, and it must be tonight!"

"Come to your senses, huh?" grunted Jordan. "I won't kill nobody that don't get in my way. I've told you how it can be worked. The guards won't kill a guard, and especially they won't kill the chaplain. So it must be tonight? O.K.!"

Jordan's tongue licked at his thin lips. He had not mentioned the iron with a wooden handle he had filed into a pointed dagger. He had succeeded in keeping this hidden. Though the big prison was crowded, only half of the cells in the storehouse were occupied.

"Just me and you!" snarled Jordan. "The chaplain comes through always at eight o'clock. He brings new books to the boys. Belcher will be the only one on trick for the block then. So we will do it this way."

BELCHER, the one man on guard, opened the storehouse door to admit the chaplain at eight o'clock. The kindly gray-haired chaplain accepted the boys as they were. They had sinned. They were being duly punished. He was glad he could comfort them, bring them the cheer of a book that might set some thinking.

The chaplain paused beside a cell and passed in a permissible book. He added his own gentle smile and kindly word. Belcher, the guard, walked beside him. The killer-eyed Jordan stepped close to the bars. Never had the chaplain been able to make an impression upon him.

Tonight a few words came unexpectedly from Jordan.

"Could I speak with you alone, chaplain? There is something I want to tell you. Something I've been thinking about that will maybe help my wife to be given care. I have had word she is ill."

The chaplain smiled gently.

"Your wife?" he said. "That is a good thought, my son. But the rules are strict. I don't know."

Belcher, the guard, was not himself a hard man. He had no liking for the sullen Jordan. But anything that the chaplain wanted, as long as it was not too flagrant a breaking of rules, would be granted.

"Here's the letter," blubbered Jordan, passing a folded paper through the bars. "I've had it a week, and it's kind of smeared up, but—"

Jim Duval held himself in with an effort, sitting back on the edge of his bunk. He knew all about that letter. That it told how badly off the supposed wife of Jordan had been left. Of how she had come out of a hospital friendless, with none to help the wife of a con.

And Jim knew how that letter had been carefully framed by a woman outside the prison. A woman who was a cheap mob moll. It was difficult for him to maintain silence. He closed his eyes. He thought of Jack Hiley.

Why, even now Old Jack was on his way to the big town. Old Jack would die in the chair. Barbara's world would be rocked. She would be branded by an iron of shame and death. No doubt, her identity would be given to the newspapers.

Then there was Old Jack Hiley himself. Jim Duval had come to like him. He thought of Old Jack's advice not to participate in any break. He could read the real heart of Jack Hiley under a perhaps justifiable desire to be avenged for the loss of half his lifetime.

The chaplain was reading the letter. Then he spoke in a low tone to Belcher, the guard. Belcher nodded.

"You will come out here with me, Duval," he said to Jim. "You may go in with Jordan, chaplain, but don't make it too long. I'm taking a chance as it is."

Jim Duval arose as if he disliked being called out. The barred door opened in two ways. All twenty doors in the block could be closed with a single bar lock, but each could be opened individually by using a key on a special mechanism. Belcher used a big key on this second lock.

The other cons, as always when the chaplain was in the storehouse, maintained a respectful silence. None but Jim Duval knew of the manner in which Jordan had planned his break. And if Jim had known of that filed knife, even he would not have joined with Jordan.

Jordan's right hand had gone behind him. The chaplain stepped past Belcher, the guard, and Jim Duval came into the door.

Then it happened. The chaplain cried out, "Why, my son! You could not—"

"Can it!" snarled Jordan. "Hold up the squawk or you get it!"

JIM almost automatically carried out his share. He had not yet seen the knife that had been pushed

against the chaplain's throat. Jim swung his fist into the guard's face, crashing him twice before the surprised man could act or shout a warning.

Belcher fell, dragging at the gun in his holster. He had left his rifle near the entrance and had only the heavy caliber automatic.

Jim was as fast and as strong as any man with his hands. Years of twisting the wheel of a ten-ton truck had made wire sinews of his muscles. One quick movement, another crash of his fist on Belcher's chin and he had the automatic.

Belcher was down, but conscious. Jim whirled toward Jordan. He saw the knife at the chaplain's throat for the first time. Other cons, hearing the racket, the cry of the gray-haired chaplain, set up booing catcalls. They could not see what was happening, but the chaplain was to them an inviolate figure.

Jim said, "Drop that knife, Jordan, or I'll—"

"Listen, mug!" exploded Jordan. "You're doing this my way! Have Belcher unlock the door to the yard! Make a mistake and I'll push this shiv! I don't go for the soft stuff! You can't shoot quick enough to keep the shiv out of the chaplain's neck!"

Jim could see that. The glittering but stupid animal eyes of Jordan smoldered with murder.

"Push that screw ahead of you!" commanded Jordan. "And walk as I say, straight to the big gates!"

The booing of the other cons died when they saw what was happening. Not a man there but would have given his life for the chaplain. They were afraid to bring on a fatal blow of the shiv. Jim's teeth set as hard as an iron mask.

Belcher's face was bleeding, and he was dazed.

"Jordan!" rapped out Jim. "I'm going with you! But if anything happens to the chaplain you'll have a stomachful of hot slugs! Come on, Belcher! Open up the yard door!"

Belcher looked at Jim Duval's glinting blue eyes and started toward the door leading into the big yard. Jim was wondering what Jordan planned to do out there. Lights were on. Shadows might lie close to the buildings, but the open space toward the big gates was floodlighted.

With his own pistol in his ribs, his eyes upon the erect figure of the chaplain, Belcher unlocked the yard door. Near one wall was his discarded rifle. Jordan, with one swift movement, dropped his handmade knife and caught up the weapon. Its muzzle pushed into the chaplain's back.

"Straight to the big gates or I'll split your spine!" snarled Jordan.

JIM DUVAL was tense. His part in the break had now become automatic movement. Even Old Jack Hiley was erased from his mind. He was deliberately weighing any chance there might be to crack down on his cellmate killer before the chaplain would get a slug in his back.

There seemed no reasonable opportunity. The crafty Jordan had his finger crooked around the rifle trigger.

The chaplain said, "If it were not for you having more blood upon your hands, my son, I would say to shoot. My years have been long and I am—"

"Can it!" grated Jordan. "Walk straight ahead!"

Belcher, the guard, said, "Do as he says, chaplain! Your life is worth a thousand of his kind! They'll get him in the end and—"

Jordan swore viciously.

"You won't go far with me, Duval, if you don't keep that screw quiet!"

"Shut up, Belcher," rapped out Jim, "or I'll let you have it!"

He had to play out the game with Jordan now. And nature suddenly favored the daring break. The floodlights were on, but they looked as if they were distant, pale moons. A thick river mist clouded the prison yard.

They were halfway to the big gates when the cons in the storehouse behind started screeching. Guards outside could be heard shouting and running toward the extra cell block. A guard on the wall tried to pierce the fog below, but all he could see was vague forms. He raised his machine gun and it racketed.

But the guard was uncertain. The blast was but a warning. Jordan let out a high yell.

"We've got the chaplain and Belcher here! Shoot again and they get it in the guts! We've got Belcher's guns! Open the gates!"

"No! Don't open the gates!" cried out the chaplain. "I will not be a party to—"

The chaplain groaned and went almost to his knees under a blow from Jordan's free fist.

"Open the gates!" again commanded Jordan. "Get the warden! Bring anybody, but the first screw that starts shooting or comes closer, puts the finger on your damned chaplain!"

The gray-haired chaplain meant well, but his own cry had been Jordan's best bet. The guards on the walls knew now that the chaplain was down there in the fog. One guard in the yard took a chance on trying to get closer.

Jordan's rifle whipped from the chaplain and fire spouted. The guard fell down and the weapon was back in the chaplain's spine.

A minute that seemed hours to Jim Duval passed. The warden's voice came from the wall.

"Are you there, chaplain?"

"Yes! But don't open—"

The warden's voice rang out.

"Open the gates, boys! Get set outside! Jordan, will you let the chaplain go?"

"I'll let him go outside!" promised Jordan.

They were halfway to the big gates when the cons in the storehouse behind started screeching. A guard tried to pierce the fog, but all he could see was vague forms.

Jim Duval knew Jordan was lying. Belcher knew it. Perhaps the chaplain knew it. There was that sinister note in Jordan's voice which could not be concealed.

The great gates swung soundlessly in the gray mist.

Jim Duval sensed rather than saw what Jordan was about to do. They were walking through, and not a machine gun exploded. The swamp lay on both sides of the short road to the main highway. Belcher was still walking ahead of his own pistol.

NOW it was coming. Jim realized it. Jordan hated the chaplain, the guard. The killer's finger was tightened. He would walk the pair only far enough to make sure the lights from the walls could not reach them. For many nights, a car had been held in readiness for Jordan down the highway.

The chaplain and Belcher were about to die.

Jim Duval shouted suddenly, "Look out, Jordan! There's a screw over there!"

Jordan jerked his head to one side, the rifle leaving the chaplain's back for perhaps two seconds.

Jim let him have it. The guard's pistol exploded two fast shots.

"Oh, my son!" exclaimed the agonized voice of the chaplain.

Jordan had screamed. The rifle flew from his hands and went into the ditch. "You'll rate for that —"

Jim heard only that much of Belcher's approval. For Jim himself was running straight along the road toward the highway. He counted on the few seconds of confusion. The chaplain's cry had been taken to mean that he had been shot.

Guards were pouring through the gates. The thick mist blocked the fog lights. Belcher had no weapon. Jim stuffed the guard's automatic into his blouse and ran on.

Perhaps the chaplain and Belcher deliberately delayed the others. Jordan, the killer, was dead. Jim Duval might have remained to become a hero, but he was fleeing. The urge to save old Jack Hiley from murder to save the future for Barbara Rand, these drove him on.

Two minutes later, a man driving slowly in the fog on the main highway had a pistol jammed through his open window by a gray-clad figure that had leaped to the running board.

CHAPTER XIV
VOICE OF THE BLACK HOOD

JIM DUVAL was smart enough not to try crossing the State line in the car. The motorist was tied up off the highway. Jim had got a break in finding that the man was about his own size. His clothes fitted, but Jim knew every car would be stopped before it reached the big town.

A mile below the line, he decided to take no further risk. He shot the stolen car off the highway, climbed out and started walking. His only thought was for haste, but he had to cover two miles and get into the suburbs of the big town on foot. It was the only safe way.

Where would Jack Hiley strike at Big Fist Leffler? At his home?

Jim Duval had more brain than the average truck driver. He judged that Big Fist Leffler would not be at his home. The newspapers would have recorded the release of Jack Hiley. Where could he find Old Jack?

He figured that Jack Hiley would go to two places. First would be Big Fist Leffler's home. The next would be the offices in the Unity Corporations building. Surely Big Fist Leffler would not be fool enough to be in his offices, except under heavy guard.

Jim hoped he might have the good luck to come upon Old Jack, waiting, seeking his chance to pay up the old murder score. He crossed the State line and headed for the Unity Corporations. At least, he could give Big Fist Leffler a warning that might save Jack Hiley from another murder.

In the meantime, Crulls Yanna had been obstinate. The Whisperer and old Quick Trigger had been with him several times during the day. The mob leader's eyes were taped. Old Quick Trigger told him he knew the Black Hood, and that the Black Hood had ratted on him.

"The Black Hood knew you tried to double-cross him and snatched Big Fist Leffler and Barbara Rand," said old Quick Trigger.

"I ain't squawkin'," had been Yanna's repeated reply.

Quick Trigger imitated a voice.

"The Black Hood said it that way," he added.

But for hours, Crulls Yanna held out. He refused to admit that the voice of the Black Hood was like that. The Whisperer knew that Yanna figured he was due for the chair, whether he talked or not.

Then late in the day, The Whisperer and Quick Trigger again left Crulls Yanna bound and guarded by Brian Boru. That was about the time the parole board meeting adjourned.

"Get on the phone, Quick Trigger, and I'll tell you what to say," instructed The Whisperer.

THUS it happened that Maten of the Big Four, shortly after Jack Hiley was released, was summoned to the parole board telephone. He heard a voice that blanched his face. Never had the Black Hood called over a public wire before. But it was undoubtedly the voice of the Black Hood that commanded:

"Maten, you and the others will come tonight. I will keep the word I gave you yesterday, and there will be a final settlement. Jack Hiley is the last parole I shall seek."

Maten thought it was the Black Hood's voice, though it was old Quick Trigger talking, with The Whisperer at his elbow. For The Whisperer was using his knowledge of what the Black Hood had promised on the previous day. So, in a few minutes, the members of the Big Four had been informed of a meeting place with the Black Hood this same night.

"I am cleaning up and leaving in a short time,"

stated the voice of the Black Hood. "When Jack Hiley has done his work, that will be the end of our association."

The Whisperer came out with Quick Trigger.

"Leave Crulls Yanna where he is; we'll forget that," he instructed. "Find Barbara Rand. Perhaps it would be best to delay an attempt to get at the files of Big Fist Leffler. I have Sergeant Thorsen and a squad making an effort to pick up Jack Hiley. After we have him safe, we will prepare to receive the members of the Big Four. Perhaps I can have the real Black Hood there to meet them."

Then The Whisperer and Quick Trigger emerged onto the street to be greeted by the first flash extras of the remarkable prison break up the river.

"I knew somethin' like that would happen!" groaned Quick Trigger. "Wildcat, that puts Jim Duval on the spot! It—"

"If I know my public, his saving of the chaplain will make him a hero," stated The Whisperer. "Quick Trigger, Jim Duval's got guts. He knew what Jack Hiley intended. Unless I'm guessing wrong, tonight will see quite a party—quite a little party. You find Barbara and see that she stays away from Unity Corporations."

But Quick Trigger did not find Barbara Rand. Nor had Sergeant Thorsen and his men succeeded in intercepting old Jack Hiley. For Jack Hiley already *was* in the Unity Corporations building.

DEACON FRAM was with Big Fist Leffler in the private offices of the Unity Corporations building. Never in all his career had Big Fist Leffler been known to quit. But tonight his shirt was open at the collar, as if it was difficult for him to breathe.

"Damn it, Deacon!" he exclaimed. "If I could only come out in the open with all this, I'd be almost ready to give myself up! Nothing ever stopped Jack Hiley, but once! He will not be stopped again! Have you had word from the men you engaged—"

Deacon Fram had been talking on the telephone.

"Four of the best private detective agencies have your home and this building fenced in, Big Fist," said Deacon Fram. "They have men who will make their own opportunity to make sure that Jack Hiley is removed, though I hardly approve of it. Hiley will have a gun, no doubt. The private dicks will see that something happens."

Big Fist Leffler stared at Deacon Fram. Big Fist had his own family, though it had been rumored the wife he had married had wanted only his money. Perhaps at this moment he was thinking of all the millions, the power his wealth had given him. Yet tonight none of it was worth a dime.

"I wonder if it all is worthwhile, Deacon?" said Big Fist slowly. "I agree with you, I don't know that I want to go so far as to have Jack Hiley killed that way. I'll tell you. Get down among them. I'll stick here where it's safe. Give orders that Jack Hiley is to be seized. I have come to the decision that I will see him and try to reason it out."

Deacon Fram nodded thoughtfully.

"Perhaps that is the best way," he agreed. "In all these years, Hiley may have grown a little soft. Maybe what we know about his daughter will be a good argument. I'll drop down and see the men. But while I'm gone, turn out all the lights for a while. I'm a little afraid Hiley might be smart enough to adopt some disguise and slip through, though everyone entering the Unity Corporations building tonight is being questioned."

Big Fist agreed to this. The lights in his private office went out. Deacon Fram left, locking each door carefully.

Outside the private offices in the tenth-floor corridor, Deacon Fram looked cautiously about. There was no one in this wide corridor, or so he believed. The figure of Barbara Rand was so slight when pressed close to the wall near a window that Deacon Fram failed to observe the girl.

After making a careful inspection, Deacon Fram turned out the corridor lights and summoned the elevator. Possibly he had in mind that Jack Hiley or anyone else coming to the tenth floor would believe that no person was on that floor with all the lights extinguished.

Besides the elevator, there were two stairways, at the front and the rear, which led into the corridor. The elevator did not at once respond to Deacon Fram's summons. The reason for this was simple. The operator had been called to another floor. There he had found himself in the grip of strong hands that hurled him into unconsciousness.

On the tenth floor, in the darkness, Deacon Fram grumbled and walked toward the front stairway. That operator was due for trouble the next day.

BARBARA RAND moved on light, quick feet. She heard Deacon Fram's steps as he started down the stairs. Seconds later, she was inserting a key in the door leading to Big Fist's private offices. This and other keys she had had made several days before.

Tonight she had missed Quick Trigger. But in a file marked C-I, the girl had located papers yellow with age. Until this moment, she had been given no opportunity to remove them. But there were a few sentences that revealed some of the early transactions between Jack Hiley and Big Fist Leffler.

Barbara wanted those papers. She desired greatly to study them. Perhaps there was the key that might prove her father's innocence. If only she could secure the papers, then find Jack Hiley before he committed the murder she was sure he intended!

The lights were off in Big Fist's outer offices. These ran in a series. One had to pass three doors to reach the inner office. Barbara was not aware that Big Fist even now was sitting in there, in the darkness. Left alone with his fear, with his conscience, with perhaps a hope that in some manner he could square his past other than with his life.

Barbara unlocked the first door, then the second.

And at that instant there came a muffled sound of conflict in the corridor she had left. It seemed close to Big Fist's door. There was an oath, blows. Then came the sharp crack of a pistol.

Barbara slipped behind a filing case in the office outside that occupied by Big Fist Leffler. And she heard Big Fist's voice cry out in the darkness of the inner office. A small light came on and illuminated the door panel.

Sobbing softly, the girl drew the automatic pistol from her handbag. She was thinking only of a murderer who had made her father pay for a crime he did not commit. Perhaps she would have shot Big Fist, but the struggle outside the door had been renewed.

IT had been the strong-handed Jim Duval who had removed the elevator operator from his post. Jim, entering the Unity Corporations building unobserved, had inquired of the operator if Big Fist Leffler was in his office.

Jim was too smart to make this inquiry on the first floor. He had entered the elevator, given a floor number, and waited until the cage was on its way up.

The elevator man said that Big Fist Leffler was there. And at almost that same instant, passing the third floor, Jim's gaze had shot through the elevator grillework to a nearby stairway. Lucky chance gave him a break. For he saw the bent, gray-haired figure of old Jack Hiley ascending the front stairway.

It was at the fourth floor that Jim acted. A single blow of his fist sent the elevator operator into oblivion. Then at the ninth floor, Jim sprang out, leaving the elevator empty there, and ran to the back stairway.

Jim darted up this stairway and ran along the tenth-floor corridor. By barest chance, Barbara Rand had just entered Big Fist's offices and closed the door. Jim would have switched on the corridor lights, but had no time to find the switch.

Footsteps were coming along the corridor. Their measured, steady walk could have been produced by only one thing: the long years of that shuffling march of the gray-clad line in prison. A flashlight appeared and its ray darted along the doors.

Jim knew it was Jack Hiley. And Jack Hiley was holding a pistol in his right hand. Jim crouched and glided along the wall. His idea was to first get his strong hands upon Old Jack before speaking. Otherwise he feared Old Jack would not listen. Jim meant to take him forcibly from the building.

Old Jack was a few seconds locating the door on which the name of "B. F. Leffler, President, Unity Corporations," appeared. There was an oath in Old Jack's throat that was almost a snarl. No light came from within the offices.

The man who had come there to even up a murder score with Big Fist Leffler drew back his pistol hand. Clearly, he intended to smash the glass, to enter the offices.

Jim Duval sprang at that instant, reached for Old Jack's wrist. The pistol exploded. Jim wanted no fight. He started to speak, when Old Jack smashed at him with the lighted flashlight. There was but one course left. Jim took it and sent a knockout uppercut to Old Jack's chin. He would carry him out.

But at that moment a bomb seemed to explode in Jim's brain. A heavy weapon crashed upon his head. Old Jack had dropped, and Jim fell beside him. Both were out cold. A hand reached in the darkness, unlocked Big Fist Leffler's door and pushed it open.

BARBARA RAND crouched beside the filing cabinet, every nerve tense. She could hear Big Fist get up from his desk and walk toward his office door. The girl held her automatic in a trembling hand. Perhaps the tortures she had undergone, the suffering over Jim Duval's imprisonment and the position of her unjustly accused father, had combined to unbalance the girl's mind temporarily.

Big Fist's inner office door opened. The head of Unity Corporations stood outlined in the dim light.

"Who is it—"

Two shots cracked almost together. So closely that they sounded as one explosion. Big Fist's hand first went to his throat.

"My father!" exclaimed the tortured girl. "Oh, why couldn't I have been the one, not you—"

Big Fist Leffler, the ruthless buccaneer of finance, stood for five or more seconds staring at the scarlet fluid gushing over his hand. Then he took one step forward and sat down. His speech was a gurgling mumble.

"All right, Jack—it was the payoff—I had it—coming!"

Barbara Rand was clenching the gun in her hand. It was horrible, too horrible. But even then she was thinking of the papers in the filing cabinet. She fumbled a key from her handbag.

THE first pistol shot of Old Jack Hiley in the corridor had been heard by a watchman two floors down. He started up, only to meet Deacon Fram rushing down the front stairway and yelling.

"Call the police!"

There were a dozen watchmen on various floors. One reached a telephone.

Sergeant Thorsen, with one of Wildcat Gordon's picked squads, was the first of the regular police to reach the tenth floor. Watchmen were standing over two men on the floor at the door of Big Fist's private offices. One man had taken a pistol from each of the men.

Sergeant Thorsen growled an oath as he saw Jim Duval. He knew all Wildcat Gordon's plans in using Jim inside the prison up the river. Now he quickly made sure that Jim's pistol had been discharged. So had that taken off Old Jack Hiley.

Sergeant Thorsen identified Hiley from the pictures that had plastered the newspapers in the past two days. Both men were returning to their senses. Thorsen could do no other than give an order to handcuff them together.

For the lights were on and the doors were an open pathway to the murder victim, Big Fist Leffler.

But when he pushed on in, Sergeant Thorsen again swore softly. Barbara Rand stood white-faced, her wrist gripped by a watchman. Papers from a filing cabinet were strewn on the floor. The watchman held the pistol he had taken from the girl.

"She done it! She done it! Her pistol was still smokin', and she was stealin' them papers when I got it!"

The watchman was no doubt honest in what he said. Sergeant Thorsen examined the pistol. He walked over to the body of Big Fist. The bullet had made a clean cut through his throat. The soft flesh had resisted but little.

Sergeant Thorsen crossed the inner office, scanning the walls. A spidery crack in a window directly in line with the door where Big Fist had stood drew his eyes. He said to one of the homicide men:

"There went your evidence, out that tenth-floor window, and if you can dredge the river below and find it, you may find out which gun it came from."

"One helluva break, sergeant," said the homicide dick. "Three guns. A dame robbing the files. Jack Hiley out there had it in for Big Fist Leffler. That young fellow, Jim Duval, believed he was framed back to stir, maybe by the big boss himself. What a headache!"

Deacon Fram had stood to one side, his fingers rubbing nervously. He looked at Barbara Rand.

"I don't understand why Miss Rand was here, but I don't think she shot Mr. Leffler," he said. "I happen to know that Jack Hiley was on his way to kill him. That Jim Duval——"

The cold, hard voice of Old Jack Hiley interrupted.

"I killed him!" he said, and he was looking at Barbara Rand, at the daughter he was seeing for the first time. "I got him, and this young fellow knocked me out as I tried to get away."

"Father!" exclaimed Barbara Rand. "Don't lie to save me! I learned you were innocent! I came up here to prove it, to kill Leffler, and I shot him when he caught me opening the files!"

"Neither is true," said Jim Duval calmly. "They know I shot Big Fist, and they are only trying to save me."

CHAPTER XV
THE HOOD COMES OFF

"NO! Jim, no! You couldn't!"

The cry from Barbara Rand proved her devotion to the tall, blue-eyed young man. Old Jack Hiley looked from one to the other.

"By the gods!" he exploded. "So that was it, young fellow! My girl there? You broke out to stop me, to save her? You have to listen to me, all of you! I tell you *I killed* Big Fist! I've been waiting twenty years to do it!"

"I believe Hiley is telling the truth," stated Deacon Fram. "Now that Mr. Leffler is dead, there may appear very good reasons why he was the only one who came up intending murder. I can tell—"

Deacon Fram ceased speaking as if a blow had been struck. The lights blinked out and darkness was instant. Sergeant Thorsen rapped out, "Stay by all the doors! Don't let anyone through! Find the switch!"

Detectives were clicking switches.

"It's the fuse box!" announced one. "The whole floor's dark! I'll find it!"

He was correct. It was the fuse box, but he would be some time finding it. For old Quick Trigger had removed the fuses and slid away, coming close to the door of the offices.

"Stay where you are! The first to move will die!"

Eerie as a banshee's wail came the piercing whisper. A whisper that froze every man in the room, yet gave no sense of direction for an attack.

"I am The Whisperer!" the chilling sound came again. "I came for only one—one who is the Black Hood!"

There was a strangled cry in the darkness. Two detectives swung their guns, but it was impossible to shoot without fear of wounding or killing someone who was not guilty of having put out the lights.

Bodies scuffled. A big detective rushed to that spot, his gun already swinging. Something like the kick of a mule exploded on the detective's jaw and he went down. Detectives blocked the doors. Barbara Rand cried out in the darkness.

"Jim? Are you all right?"

"All right, Barbara!"

"What in the hell—"

Old Jack was growling, wrenching at the handcuff tying him to Jim Duval's wrist. The scuffling of bodies had ceased. There was no further whisper. Sergeant Thorsen started for the outside.

"I'll find that fuse box," he stated. "Everyone stay put."

But a window creaked. The rush of men over there revealed that the sash had been thrown up. There came a splash from the river ten floors below. None there knew it was only a chair that had been dropped.

But for an instant the doors had been cleared. A figure passed through all but one without interference. At the last door a smashing fist was used, and a detective went down. He got up yelling, but afraid to shoot.

"The Whisperer went out this way!" he yelled.

"He jumped from the window!" announced Sergeant Thorsen. "Get some men down! Order boats out, but we'll probably be too late!"

Then the lights came on, as suddenly as they had gone out. Quick Trigger had received his signal and replaced the fuses.

And at the same instant, the cutting voice of Wildcat Gordon rang out from the inner office doorway.

"What's going on here?"

WILDCAT strode in, his colorless eyes shooting inquiring glances from under the brim of his army hat. He was wearing a suit of violent brown, which had at least matched the lurid hue of his yellow shoes.

"Why, Big Fist Leffler's been murdered; we have three suspects and—" began Sergeant Thorsen.

Then the wooden-faced sergeant's statement ended abruptly. He shot a glance around the room.

"Where's Deacon Fram?" he demanded. "Chief, we've had a visit from The Whisperer. I thought he had gone through the window. One of the men was knocked down at the outside door. Maybe he went out that way. But Deacon Fram was talking when it happened. You don't suppose—"

Sergeant Thorsen looked at the open window.

"The Deacon was about to tell something of Big Fist Leffler's past," he added. "The lights went out. The Whisperer came and got away. No two men went out through the door. Deacon Fram must be in the river."

"Well, get men down and order the boats!" snapped Wildcat. "And these are the three suspects, huh?"

"I did it, Commissioner Gordon," said Jim, in a firm voice. "I—"

"Nuts!" snapped Wildcat. "Just because you happened to kill a man in a fair fight once, doesn't mean you're a killer, even if you did knock off that rat to save the chaplain up the river! Boy, when this is over you're going places, and it won't be on the seat of a truck, either!"

Barbara Rand stared at Wildcat Gordon.

"You don't think Jim—I know he didn't, Commissioner Gordon! But—"

"I done it, damn it!" rasped Old Jack Hiley. "So what's all the holdup? Who's this Whisperer?"

"That's a long story," said Wildcat. "But I'm afraid, Hiley, I can't use anything you may say against you. For one reason, I believe this Whisperer must have dropped the murder gun outside. I was coming in just as the lights came on and picked this up."

Wildcat laid a handkerchief-wrapped automatic on Big Fist's desk. He said it might be well to check for fingerprints.

Just then one of the detectives cried out.

"Great smoke, chief! Look back here!"

Everyone moved over. The detective pulled a limp body from behind a filing cabinet. It was swathed in a black hood down to the shoulders, with holes for the eyes. The detective started to pull off the hood.

"Don't touch it yet!" snapped Wildcat. "Set him in a chair! According to the newspapers, The Whisperer is the Black Hood! He admitted that when he knocked out one of my men, Detective Dayton!"

The Black Hood was limp and unconscious. But the dicks propped him up in Big Fist's big chair. They looked at Wildcat Gordon, puzzled. Wildcat's colorless eyes held little expression. He walked to the outer door.

"Quick Trigger!" he called. "Perhaps the five gentlemen who came into the building, then started out when they learned there was a murder up here, might be interested!"

BARBARA RAND and the others stared at Wildcat Gordon, at the five well-dressed men who were pushed through the office doors. One of these men was talking in a commanding voice:

"The police here will pay plenty for this indignity! We come to your city on business, and we are treated as if we were thugs! I happen to be the governor of—"

"That's right," interrupted Wildcat Gordon. "I remember seeing you in the newspapers. And you other gentlemen seem to have been quite prominent lately in connection with the parole board. I regret the boys were so hasty as to put handcuffs on you. Perhaps it is an error."

"Error?" shouted the dignified governor. "It's an error that will echo through the country! It's an—"

"Shut up!" snapped Wildcat, doubling a fist. "Or I'll add to the little error by smacking some of your gold teeth down your throat! And that goes for you Maten, and the rest of you! The first one who speaks will think a horse had kicked him in the mouth!"

Even Sergeant Thorsen betrayed a faint hint of emotion in his face, which usually was wooden. All there knew the man speaking was the governor of the neighboring state. All had heard of the fantastic exploits of Wildcat Gordon, but this was a bit beyond all others.

The figure in the black hood was stirring. He put up his hands and started pulling the hood away.

Wildcat completed jerking it off. Deacon Fram sat there with a blue bruise on his chin. His face was the color of chalk. He was staring at the governor, at the four members of the parole board with the handcuffs on their wrists.

But Deacon Fram locked his lips primly.

"What happened?" he murmured. "I heard The Whisperer, and then—"

"And then my coppers picked up five distinguished gentlemen doing a one-way sneak out of the building when they found out Big Fist Leffler was murdered!" cut in Wildcat. "My boys did not seem to recognize the governor as one of these men, so they acted hastily."

Deacon Fram was swallowing hard.

"Well, what has that to do with me?" he said slowly. "The Whisper—"

"Perhaps The Whisperer was the Black Hood who summoned these five worthy gentlemen to our town," stated Wildcat with deadly calmness. "And perhaps it was The Whisperer who had Jack Hiley freed to murder Big Fist, then pulled the job himself when Jim Duval stopped Hiley."

Deacon Fram said, "How would I know—"

"Tell him what you told me, Maten!" rapped out Wildcat. "That you were on your way here because of a telephone message from the Black Hood, telling you to come and collect your murder fees for the paroles you sold him!

"Tell him, Maten, that you spilled the beans about his phone call to you yesterday, when he wouldn't let you beg off on paroling Jack Hiley as a final payoff for what he knew about you and the governor, and these other three eminent politicians!"

"Why, I didn't—"

But Deacon Fram was rearing up. His eyes held the deadliness of a snake about to strike.

"So you talked, Maten!" he yelled. "You and your precious governor! You think maybe you can get away with the paroles you sold before I happened to get the lowdown on you? And you, governor, letting yourself be tricked into this by Maten! Why, damn you, I've evidence of kickbacks on steel contracts in your State that will—"

THE governor went white. He started to bluster. Wildcat had been waiting for that exact minute.

"No one talked, Deacon," he said quietly. "No one but you and Maten. But perhaps some dirty snooper listened in. You just now talked yourself straight into the hot seat for a dozen murders, and talked your five nice friends into a blow-off that will echo throughout the country, as the worthy governor stated. Take them away, boys. They make me feel bad. And you can remove the bracelets from our other three friends here."

Barbara Rand went to Jim Duval's strong arms. Old Jack Hiley wiped a sleeve across his eyes.

"I believe, Hiley," stated Wildcat, "you will find evidence that may give you quite a slice of Big Fist Leffler's properties. You see, Deacon Fram had long ago got the power of attorney that would have controlled Unity Corporations. He overplayed his hand when he started fooling around with pay rolls and some of his parole birds murdered my cops."

One of the detectives said, "But how did The Whisperer get into this thing, chief?"

"I wouldn't know about that," stated Wildcat quietly. "But some of these days, if I can get my hands on that crook, I think I'll put him in charge of a special murder detail."

The telephone rang. Wildcat picked it up. A girl's brittle voice said, "I learned where you had gone from headquarters. Do I have to keep coffee hot for you and grandpa all night? What have you two been doing now?"

Wildcat shot a side glance at Jim Duval and Barbara Rand.

"You're not old enough to know about such things, Tiny," he replied. "But I've been playing Cupid."

"Humph!" sniffed Tiny Traeger scornfully. "Maybe someday you'll quit being dumb and look around at home! If ever Cupid gets you, he'll have to blast a way in with a couple of machine guns!"

The receiver clicked in Wildcat's ear

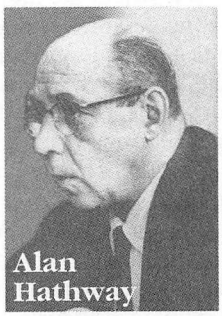
THE END

Laurence Donovan

The Street & Smith house name "Clifford Goodrich" masked the identities of writers Laurence Donovan and Alan Hathway.

One of the most prolific wordsmiths of the pulp era, Laurence Donovan (1885-1950) pounded out thrillers for a variety of magazines including *Argosy, The Shadow, Doc Savage, Movie Action, The Phantom Detective, Zeppelin Stories* and *The Skipper,* along with the original 14-issue run of *The Whisperer*.

Alan Hathway (1906-1977) was a legendary American newspaperman. After stints at the Chicago *Herald-Examiner* and the New York *Daily News*, Hathway succeeded fellow Doc Savage ghost Harold A. Davis as managing editor of *Newsday.* He wrote most of the Whisperer shorts in *The Shadow* and the lead novels in the 1940-42 revival of *The Whisperer* magazine.


Alan Hathway

The Air-mail Murders

Like rain they dropped from the heavens: human bodies!—and The Whisperer made the lightning that exposed the sinister plot!

As the stout hempen noose tightened about his neck, The Whisperer knew that he had been expected.

The noose dangled from an overhead trestle in the abandoned shipyard. Two blocks away lay the gaunt form of what had once been an ocean liner.

Apparently, it had been anticipated that The Whisperer would investigate the ancient ship. It was now a gaudy hotel and night club known as the Paradise Aquatique.

Four burly forms sprang from the gloom as the noose tightened. One man hauled on a block and tackle, jerking the slight body of the gray, blurry man into the air.

The other three leaped toward the dangling figure. But they didn't touch him. The "supercrook," who was more feared by crooks themselves than by police, moved quickly.

His steely hands seized the rope above him and The Whisperer went up it like a monkey. Twenty feet in the air, a knife whipped from his pocket. The rope parted and the slight body plummeted to earth. It took two of the mobsters with it.

The darkness had aided the would-be killers up to that point. From then on, it seemed in league with The Whisperer. The wispy, gray figure was almost not visible. He seemed everywhere at once; seemed to have as many arms as a centipede has legs.

The thugs flailed with their arms. They were afraid to shoot. They probably would have just killed each other, anyway. A quaint, round-brimmed hat was knocked from the powder-gray hair of The Whisperer. An oddly pointed chin showed dimly in the gloom. The eyes were almost colorless.

A husky, chilling whisper of a voice made the attackers falter.

One thug fell under an unbelievable impact from the fist of a man so small. A second thug began to sneak away. The other two stood their ground for a moment. It is doubtful that they liked their predicament. They knew the reputation of The Whisperer.

The menacing figure of the underworld had come

By Clifford Goodrich

back to the city when many things were happening; things that baffled the police. The Whisperer had let it be known that he had returned. He knew that information might force action from the crooks behind the air-mail murders. Action that might betray them.

The Whisperer knew that Police Commissioner James "Wildcat" Gordon had been stumped by the air-mail murders. They had begun while Wildcat was investigating the insistent rumor of a gigantic smuggling plot to bring in drugs from the Far East.

The air-mail murders put the quest very much in the shade. Men of money had been kidnapped. There had been demands for ransom. Then, just as the mail plane roared overhead, the bodies of the missing men would plummet to Earth. Each had borne tags with air-mail stamps, addressed to Commissioner Gordon.

One wealthy realtor, George Halbird, was still missing. He had disappeared a week before. Halbird, like the others, was supposed to be wealthy. Sharp, perhaps shady, deals had helped to make his fortune. But now, his bank account was empty.

PERHAPS The Whisperer was thinking of that as he drove hard, compact fists home. Whatever he was thinking, he was rudely interrupted. A siren cut the dark air. The shrill blast of a police whistle followed it. A police emergency truck roared up, floodlights blazing. The dingy shipyard area was suddenly bathed in light.

Uniformed figures poured from the truck. An unpleasant, nasal voice shrieked orders.

"The Whisperer!" it squawked. "Get him first! Blast him on the spot! You'll all get promotions!"

The cops swarmed over The Whisperer. They seemed reluctant to kill him. They no doubt knew that the mysterious figure often solved crimes for them that the department was unable to cope with. But the nasal-voiced commander hopped up and down in rage.

He was a long-nosed, fish-mouthed individual. His title was Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton.

Bolton had two all-consuming ambitions. One was to replace Wildcat Gordon as police commissioner. The other was to sneer at The Whisperer from the outside of a good stout cell. Bolton particularly resented The Whisperer's solution of crimes that baffled himself.

He was spectacularly unsuccessful in both of his ambitions.

Four husky cops held The Whisperer. It seemed that Bolton had succeeded at last. But the cops suddenly felt they had seized an eel.

The slight, wiry figure twisted. Two cops fell sprawling. A pair of queer-looking guns leaped into the hands of The Whisperer. There came a sound as if imprisoned air had rushed from high-compression tanks.

The Whisperer did not shoot at the cops, nor even at the angry, dancing Bolton. It was another target: the floodlights on the emergency truck went out with a crash of glass. The Whisperer slipped his supersilenced pistols into special pockets. He bent low and ran, weaving like a brokenfield runner on the gridiron.

The Whisperer had to get away fast. He was not afraid of conflict. But he did not want Bolton to realize both of his ambitions in a single stroke. For The Whisperer was Wildcat Gordon, police commissioner.

His peculiarly efficient methods of stamping out crime would not have met with the approval of his superiors. Not even if that group did term itself the reform political party.

Red stabs of flame suddenly cut the night ahead of the fleeing Whisperer. A gun roared half a dozen times. Lead tore through his drab gray clothing. The shots did not come from the direction of the cops. They came from the direction of the Paradise Aquatique.

The Whisperer hurled himself to the ground. He rolled, slid to his feet again and raced in a different direction. He was so silent that the gunner did not hear his footsteps.

The Whisperer collided with the gunman with an exclamation of surprise. The "gunman" was a girl! The impact knocked the breath from her. She was momentarily stunned.

A quick flick of a pencil flashlight showed The Whisperer that she was far too pretty to be out at night in such surroundings. And it showed him that she was Dianne Le Mere, chief hostess for F. Raymond Carleton, owner of the Paradise Aquatique.

THE WHISPERER'S eyes glittered strangely. He tore on through the night before the girl had a chance to recover. It had occurred to him that the Paradise Aquatique would have made an ideal smuggling depot. It was beached on the waterfront, and had a labyrinth of passages and compartments that would make excellent caches for smuggled drugs.

The only thing about the drug plot that had baffled The Whisperer was that he knew no drugs had actually been smuggled into the city. His underworld sources of information would have tipped him off to that.

They had told him, just that day, that the first big shipment was due in a mere matter of hours. And The Whisperer was convinced that there was a connection between the drug plot and the air-mail murders!

The gray figure reached a parked coupé. The car was as drab as he was. Even before he stepped inside, his hands were moving. A quick motion and the powdery-white hair became a reddish hue. One hand went to his mouth, and The Whisperer's oddly pointed chin vanished. The chin became as square and hard as a chip of granite.

The round-brimmed hat disappeared. Even the gray clothes became a loudly checked suit, as he squirmed into the seat of the car. Gray spats were replaced by a pair of vivid yellow shoes. A bright red carnation glowed in his coat lapel like a stop light.

"Dammitall, Wildcat," a heavy voice boomed from beside him, "I don't like this a bit! You almost got nabbed back there. I wish I'd never made those dental plates!"

The gaunt man beside Wildcat Gordon was bald, except for two gray tufts of hair over his ears. He squinted at Wildcat nearsightedly. Actually, retired Deputy Richard Traeger, better known as old "Quick Trigger," saw a lot more than he was given credit for.

A master at disguise, he had made the queer dental plates that transformed Wildcat Gordon into The Whisperer. He was the only man alive who knew that the two personalities were the same. Wildcat regarded him almost as a father.

Wildcat's natural voice clipped sharp orders.

"I'm going back, Quick," he rapped. "You leave the car here and scout around on foot, and rush anybody who looks suspicious. Take them to headquarters. That includes the girl!"

Wildcat slammed the door of the coupé and disappeared from sight. Deputy Bolton had repaired the lights of the emergency truck when Wildcat strode up to the excited group of cops. Bolton's small, fishlike mouth twisted open as he recognized his chief.

Wildcat's colorless Texas eyes glinted from beneath the brim of an army campaigns hat, as he surveyed his deputy.

"Henry," he snapped, "I specifically told you to stay at headquarters! What's going on here?"

Bolton gulped. "The Whisperer!" he spluttered "We got a tip that—"

"When you have orders from me, follow them!" Wildcat clipped."You're interfering with my investigation of a smuggling case!"

A large man who had not emerged from the truck struggled to the ground. He had a thick mane of black hair and a foreign-looking spade beard that hid whatever his face might really have looked like.

"This is at my suggestion, Commissioner Gordon," the newcomer announced in an authoritative tone. "While you are spending all your time on some minor smuggling case, men have been murdered! I have been informed that I am the next to go!"

WILDCAT knew the man. He was Doctor Josef Scalzi, owner of a private sanitarium on a rocklike island in the middle of the wide West River that skirted the city. Wildcat had searched Scalzi's sanitarium when he first heard the rumors of the dope-smuggling ring. But he had found nothing.

Scalzi flourished two letters under Wildcat's nose. Both were typewritten, and were brief.

"You had better get cash on hand," the first read. "Victims who do not have cash are air-mailed to Wildcat Gordon—dead! You are next!"

The second was a warning.

"You are on the spot," it informed the doctor. "If you clear out with what money you can salvage, you will escape certain death. This is a sincere warning to save you. Take in that manner. A friend."

The letters bore different postmarks.

Scalzi seemed about to explode into fragments as Wildcat read. His spade heard quivered.

"I'll not leave!" he screamed. "I demand protection!"

Wildcat's eyes were hard as he looked from the letters to the bearded doctor. It occurred to him that culprits in a plot not infrequently write threatening letters to themselves. It gives them a reason to work closely with the police, keep tabs on what is going on. But Wildcat also thought of something else.

The emergency truck, at Wildcat's order, started to return to headquarters. Half a dozen blocks away, the noise of a plane's motor droned through the air. It was the first night-mail plane.

Instinctively, Wildcat and Scalzi looked up at the running lights of the ship. Soon it was directly overhead.

The cop driving the truck was the first to cry out. He jammed on the brakes, nearly hurling the occupants from the truck. A body swished through the air, thudded to the pavement. Wildcat Gordon leaped to the street.

The body was the crushed remnant of what had been a man.

Around the neck was tied an address tag. It bore air-mail stamps and was addressed to Police Commissioner Wildcat Gordon. Scalzi paled, as Wildcat stooped to read the inscription. It was the same as those on the bodies of other men who had been kidnapped.

"This is George Halbird," it read. "It is unfortunate that he had no ready cash. The next victim would be wise to supply himself when he gets his initial warning."

Scalzi's spade beard quivered.

"I-I'm next," he faltered. "A-and I haven't got much cash!"

Wildcat Gordon looked hard at Scalzi for a moment. The he whirled on one heel.

"Go back to headquarters," he snapped. "I've got a job to do!"

WILDCAT hailed a cab and went back to where he had parked his coupé. He climbed into it and drove to one of the most disreputable parts of the city. There he had a room where he was known only as D. Smith, the wispy, gray figure who was The Whisperer. He was sure the airline companies were not involved in the murders. He had checked on them thoroughly. He was also reasonably sure the air-mail murder victims had not been warned before they had been kidnapped.

None had asked for police protection. None but Scalzi. And Wildcat Gordon thought that deviation from criminal routine was peculiar. There had to be a reason.

Another thing he knew was that, within a few weeks of each kidnapping and murder, the victims had drawn large sums of cash from their bank accounts. There was something screwy someplace. And The Whisperer intended to learn just what made it so.

Wildcat raced up narrow, dimly lighted stairs to his secret room. He became again The Whisperer. The oddly pointed chin, the blurry gray hair were there. But The Whisperer this time was stouter. His shoulders seemed to have grown. He was almost top-heavy. He strode to a phone booth and called headquarters. He removed the dental plates as he did so, and asked for Quick Trigger in the clipped tones of Wildcat Gordon.

"Let her go," he instructed. "I'll pick her up. Don't let her know she will be followed."

He hung up and replaced the dental plates. Then he drove toward the river. He parked near a shabby shack directly opposite the towering island that held Doctor Josef Scalzi's sanitarium.

Inside the shack, there was a variety of apparatus. A telescope was focused on the island. So was an automatic moving picture camera. Another camera bathed the river with infra-red light, invisible to the naked eye.

The Whisperer first looked through his specially constructed telescope. The island loomed, a high, rocky upthrust. Years ago, before water had been piped to the city from the mountains, the island held a reservoir. It was rocky, and inaccessible except from one landing platform. The Whisperer knew that no boat could land at any other point than that.

The continuous film, behind an infra-red filter, gave him a complete picture of what came and went from that point. Swiftly, he examined the film, which had been automatically developed in a tank below the camera. It showed nothing except the comings and goings of Scalzi and his chief assistant.

The assistant was an ugly looking fellow. He had a wart on his nose almost as large as the nose itself. His name was Milus Krug.

The film had been running continuously for several days. The Whisperer had examined it each day. It had showed no departures nor arrivals from the island except those of Scalzi and his assistant.

The Whisperer was absorbed in concentration. The blow that struck him on the head came without warning. Whoever struck it had been smart enough to disconnect the wire alarm that The Whisperer had constructed around the shack. He must have been there when The Whisperer arrived.

THE WHISPERER whirled, half conscious. The blackjack struck again. Power ebbed from the motor nerves of the gray man. He was dimly conscious of what was going on, but was powerless to prevent it.

A heavy man, his back turned, struck a match. He emptied a can of kerosene and lighted it. The shack blazed with a sudden flame, filled with soot-black smoke. The intruder raced out of the door.

Flames ate up the wooden flooring, leaped to the tables and chairs. The room became an inferno. The Whisperer could out move his arms or legs. He managed to roll over the floor. He pressed against a hidden lever in the planking.

A large section gave way, plummeted him into a black pit below. Equipment in the room tumbled after him, crashed into a tangled heap.

The trap closed above him. The flame and smoke, going upward, did not penetrate into the pit below. Slowly, strength came back to The Whisperer. He flicked on his flashlight and examined the wreckage. One piece he picked up.

It was a square mirror, now cracked in two. It was strangely thick for a mirror. An outdoor advertising man might have recognized it as the type of wired mirror used to sell merchandise.

It was based on the tendency of men and women to look into a mirror, if one is handy. The proximity of the human body, charged with electricity as it is, sets up an interference with a current. In the advertising mirrors, that interruption starts a talking machine record with a sales message. In The Whisperer's, it clicked a camera that took a picture.

The Whisperer whipped out the plate and looked at the film. He saw the large wart on the nose of Milus Krug, chief assistant of Doctor Josef Scalzi!

In that instant, The Whisperer saw a great many things not on the film. He thought of something he should have suspected from the beginning. He opened a sliding door in the side of the pitlike cellar and raced through a corridor. He emerged on the ground, leaped into his drab coupé.

The little car whirled through the streets at top speed. The Whisperer did not go to the dock that gave onto the river. There, he could have gotten a boat and rowed to the island. Instead, he went to the highway over the mud flats that led to F. Raymond Carleton's Paradise Aquatique.

The Whisperer did not see the wart on the nose of the man driving the car that followed him. The Whisperer was in a hurry. He might have made more of what he now suspected, if he had time to wait. The city records might have given him definite information. But he thought more murder was on the way, and soon. He also thought it probable that one of the next victims would be The Whisperer. There was no time to spare.

HALF a mile away, The Whisperer parked his car. Silently, he crept toward the towering hulk that was the Paradise Aquatique. He moved quietly, unseen, up the glorified gangway that served as an entrance. A husky doorman stood there.

The Whisperer stopped, unscrewed a light bulb from the line that decorated the gangway. He hurled it with a quick motion.

The doorman didn't see it fly past him. He heard it as it crashed into the bulkhead on the other side of the ship. He raced over to find out what had made the noise. That was why he didn't see The Whisperer

slide quickly into a companionway leading aft.

Just as The Whisperer disappeared from sight, a tall, gaunt individual strode up from the remade dining saloon that served as a nightclub.

If the newcomer had been any thinner, he probably would have been called a human toothpick. He scarcely cast a shadow, as it was. But the hands were huge, gnarled and scarred. F. Raymond Carleton had fought his way to riches in the nightclub racket by methods that were more than direct.

He walked catlike now, to the spot where the light bulb had crashed against the bulkhead. Then he whirled quickly, a hard glitter coming to his eyes.

The Whisperer did not see that. It probably would not have made any difference to his plans, if he had. He trod silently down stairways, through steel doors, into what had been the engine room of the ship. The engines were gone now. They had been sold as junk.

The pale light of his flash showed the old engine room was empty. The Whisperer went through another door into the boiler room. He grunted with satisfaction at what he found. Half a dozen large cans stood at one side of the room.

He opened the lids, found them filled with black blasting powder. He knew now that his suspicion was well founded. He felt sure of the secret of the air-mail murders!

Two things happened quickly as The Whisperer made that decision. He turned his lights slowly. A girl's scream cut through his thoughts. Diane Le Mere, the pleasure boat hostess, stood directly in the path of the flashlight.

Her face was contorted in sudden fear. She was not looking at The Whisperer. She was looking behind him. She screamed again, and fled through the space between the ancient boilers.

The Whisperer acted as though he had not seen her. He flicked off the flashlight, walked slowly ahead into the darkness. He lighted a cigarette carelessly, dropped the match to the floor. As it flickered out, a hoarse chuckle sounded behind him. Then lights flashed on in the boiler room.

The Whisperer turned, and saw the four thugs who had attacked him earlier in the night. One cradled a Tommy gun under his arm. He raised it slowly.

"Stick 'em up, wise guy!" he rasped. "We got you right, this time!"

THE WHISPERER shrugged his queerly broad shoulders, began to raise his hands. He glanced once above him. Then his right hand moved swiftly. He whipped the cigarette from his lips, flicked it unerringly toward the side of the old boiler room. It landed squarely in the center of an opened can of blasting powder.

Whoom!

The detonation made the old hulk shudder from stem to stern. The mobsters screamed in pain and terror. The terrific blast in the confines of the boiler room was like a shell explosion in the breech of a cannon.

The Whisperer leaped upward as the blast boomed fourth. He had been standing directly under a boiler room ventilator that led to the deck above. The force of the explosion shot him upward like a projectile. His body slammed against the turned lip of the shaft, and he tumbled out on the deck.

The Whisperer was stunned. He struggled to his feet, looked about him. He saw the trim figure of Diane Le Mere racing along the deck. Behind her, a larger figure drifted. It looked familiar. The Whisperer strained his eyes, but the gloom prevented recognition.

The man in gray went quickly to the rooms that had been the captain's quarters. It was now Carleton's office. The Whisperer made a quick phone call, then rifled through some papers and tore back on deck.

He went in the direction taken by Diane Le Mere, found a hatchway leading to the afterhold. The Whisperer smiled grimly, as he climbed down into the darkness.

In the bowels of the ship, he heard a door clang. Then he found the door. It led to the disused shaft alley leading from the engine room to the propeller. Diane Le Mere was leading him to the thing he sought.

At the end of the shaft alley, he found another hatchway. It was newer than the others, had been built after the liner had been beached on the mud flats.

The Whisperer climbed down a ladder. He went through a shaft that had been blasted out of solid rock. It terminated in a great iron pipe. The pipe was so large a tall man could stand erect without any trouble.

The Whisperer knew then that he was in a water tunnel that had supplied the city when Doctor Josef Scalzi's island had been a reservoir, before water had been piped down from the mountains. The obsolete maps of the city's water system would have shown where that water tunnel could be found.

The Whisperer knew, as he raced along, that the smuggling ring was about to begin operations. He was sure his underworld tip on that had been correct. And he knew now that two more air-mail murders were about to be carried out. Perhaps three if the gang could catch The Whisperer.

THE gray figure emerged in a windy darkness. He knew every foot of the rocky island. He thought he had searched it thoroughly. The sanitarium itself was separated from the rest of the towering rock. The Whisperer did not go to the sanitarium. He skirted a rocky promontory on the side of the island toward the city.

The dim outline of a pile of cut stone showed in the gloom. Wildcat Gordon had seen it in daylight. Buried in a tangle of weeds and underbrush, it looked as if someone had started some kind of structure and had abandoned it. A long pole lay beside it.

A hoarse whistle burst involuntarily from the lips of The Whisperer. He saw several men working frantically at the structure. And he saw what had been going on. But that whispering whistle gave the mobsters warning.

Two men plunged onto the back of The Whisperer with angry curses. The gray figure went down. But he squirmed, shot out steel-hard fists. The two thugs were no match for the knuckles of The Whisperer.

The gray man freed himself, ran low over the rocky ground. He was almost invisible in the darkness. As he ran, he tripped over a struggling form.

He scooped that form up as if it had been a child's rag doll. If it was Diane Le Mere. She was bound and gagged. Wild fear showed in her dark eyes. The Whisperer's quick fingers untied her.

"Run!" he clipped. "The south side of the island! It is a long drop—but the water is deep! We may make it!"

The girl panted in terror. She didn't ask any questions. The hoarse shouts of angry men welled up behind them. Diane Le Mere raced ahead of The Whisperer. They took the only path leading to the south side of the island. A rasping laugh crawled from the throat of one of their pursuers.

The girl suddenly screamed. She tripped, disappeared entirely from sight. The Whisperer was going too fast to stop. The wire stretched across the path tripped him as it had tripped the girl. He felt himself falling into a pit of blackness. He had a dim, brief glimpse of the girl, unconscious at the bottom of a rock-strewn pit.

Then consciousness left The Whisperer.

THE first thing The Whisperer noticed when he regained consciousness was a tag around his neck. It was addressed, he knew, to Commissioner Wildcat Gordon. The gray man's hands and feet were bound.

Nearby, The Whisperer saw a long pole as large in girth as a tree trunk. The pole protruded at an odd angle from the pile of rocks that had taken on a new meaning to The Whisperer.

The thing was a huge catapult. It was built so that it could be taken apart or assembled quickly. It was powerful enough to hurl a man's body through the air and across the half of the river that lay between the island and the city.

A booming voice made The Whisperer jerk erect.

"Dammitall, Wildcat'll get this Scalzi guy for this!" the big voice of Quick Trigger snorted. "You can't get away with this! Wildcat left orders—"

The Whisperer twisted. He knew now who that familiar-looking figure had been, trailing Diane Le Mere on the deck of the nightclub liner. He saw old Quick Trigger bound as securely as himself. He knew the gaunt man was bluffing, gambling for time. A harsh voice answered the retired deputy.

"Cops cannot get here," the voice rasped. "The iron door is barred, even if they did find the tunnel. All three of you will die!"

Quick Trigger snorted again. He cast an anxious glance at The Whisperer.

"I tell you, Wildcat'll get you," Quick Trigger insisted. "You might get a break if you turned The Whisperer over to him. Even Bolton would go easy on you for doing that. It doesn't matter what you do to me."

Quick Trigger was desperate. He was trying to talk the killers into sparing the life of The Whisperer. Even if it unmasked Wildcat Gordon, it would at least save his life.

The killer in charge of operations snarled at Quick Trigger. He seemed a big man. A black mask entirely concealed his features. A flowing black robe completely covered his body.

"I shall turn The Whisperer over to Wildcat Gordon," he sneered. "But The Whisperer will be very dead! You shall go first. Then The Whisperer. The girl will be the last. The air-mail will do big business, this night!"

He laughed harshly. The Whisperer noticed then that Diane Le Mere was lying, bound, near old Quick Trigger. Her face was a set mask. She was fighting against the fear of the death she faced. The Whisperer's chilling voice cut the night.

"If you are wise, my friend," his husky tones rasped, "you will dispose of The Whisperer first. He has escaped even more astute criminals than you. You can wait for the next air-mail for the rest."

The masked man whirled. His face could not be seen. But there was indecision in his movements. He glanced at a wrist watch.

"There will be no next air-mail," he shrilled. "All three of you will go with this one! But you are right! You shall be the first to go!"

THE masked man made a quick gesture with one hand. Wart-nosed Milus Krug seized the helpless form of The Whisperer, roped him lightly to the end of the catapult.

The Whisperer caught a glance at the mechanism of the death machine. It was a complicated combination of springs and weights. But, at the most, it would take a dozen minutes to set it for the second victim to be hurled into eternity. The Whisperer's strategy in being the first to go would not give Quick Trigger much time to figure out a way to save himself.

Tears streamed down the face of the old deputy. He started to speak. "Wi-Wi—"' he began. Then he clamped his mouth shut. Even with death before him and Wildcat, Quick Trigger kept his promise. He would not reveal that his protege was The Whisperer.

The masked leader grew impatient. He glanced again at his watch. Faintly, the drone of an airplane motor sounded in the air.

"She backtracks on the same course, taking off," he rasped. "That will be ten minutes between the first and second. We'll have to make it snappy!"

The motor droned louder. The landing lights showed red and green dots in the sky. The masked leader waved his hand. There was a sharp whish as the catapult released. The body of The Whisperer shot hundreds of feet into the dark air of the night.

Quick Trigger groaned and turned his face to the ground. He was thinking of the broken bodies of the other victims of the air-mail murders.

QUICK TRIGGER was tied to the catapult when all hell broke loose a few minutes later. He was thinking that if he had never made those dental plates, Wildcat would not have gotten into this mess. If he had not been The Whisperer, Wildcat probably would have gone to the Paradise Aquatique with a suitable squad of cops.

Quick Trigger didn't get very far in his thinking. There was a crashing roar from the end of the island as high explosive ripped apart the barred door of the water tunnel. Then the sulphurous tones of Wildcat Gordon ripped into the night!

"Round up every man on the island!" Wildcat roared. "Shoot to kill if anybody resists! We're playing this one for keeps!"

Quick Trigger's mouth dropped open with an expression as blank as a ventriloquist's dummy. The island suddenly swarmed with cops. Leading them was the bristling figure of Wildcat Gordon.

Guns roared and spikes of flame bit into the night. Mobsters dropped, through permanently with any crime they might have planned.

Milus Krug moved nervously toward the lever of the catapult. He seemed too dazed to realize he was acting under the eyes of the police commissioner. Wildcat's Police Positive roared and a hole leaped into Krug's forehead.

A knife flashed in Wildcat's hand. It zipped through the air, quivered as it smacked into the wooden pole of the catapult. The light rope that bound Quick Trigger parted beneath the blade. The old deputy slid from the pole as Krug slumped against the lever. The catapult pole leaped into the air, but Quick Trigger was not aboard. "Hellamighty, Wildcat, what—" Wildcat Gordon was busy. He leaped upon the masked leader, tore the mask from him. It was F. Raymond Carleton. The flowing black robe he wore hid the thinness of his body. He would have been recognized anywhere without it.

Wildcat released the girl. Then he whirled on Carleton. "Where is Scalzi?" he rapped. Carleton opened his mouth. But he didn't get a chance to reply. Two uniformed cops pushed a grimy, wild-eyed figure before them. It was Doctor Josef Scalzi.

"I KNOW all about it now!" Scalzi screamed. "They want this island as part of a smuggling plot! They tried to scare me into fleeing. It was worth millions to them! Krug offered to buy me out. But I wouldn't scare, so they were going to kill me and destroy the body. They could say I ran away."

"I know," Wildcat Gordon said, evenly. "And they killed the first few men they got to put up cash to finance the smuggling. They used a phony kidnapping racket to keep them from talking when the gang kept the money for themselves. It threw the police off the real reason for the kidnapping. That explains the withdrawal of large amounts of cash from the bank accounts of the victims before they were kidnapped.

"I suspected you were in it, at first, Scalzi. But if you had written those two letters to yourself with the intention of turning them over to me, you would not have been fool enough to use the same typewriter for both of them. Particularly, your own typewriter. I have a memory for typewriter peculiarities. They are easier than finger prints."

Wildcat paused for a moment, looked at the dead body of Milus Krug. "Apparently Krug was that big a fool, though," he concluded. "But he didn't know I would get both of those letters." Diane Le Mere edged up to Wildcat as he directed twinkling eyes at old Quick Trigger.

"How did you get here, Quick?" Wildcat demanded. There was amusement in his eyes. Old Quick looked at the ground for a moment. He gulped. "I-I followed The Whisperer to the ship," he lied, lamely.

Diane Le Mere looked at Wildcat. There were tears in her eyes.

"We owe him our lives," she said, slowly. "I am a Federal narcotics agent and was investigating a drug-running tip. These policemen tell me they were at the ship when you arrived, that The Whisperer telephoned who I was and where I had gone. And now he's—" She broke off with a sob.

Wildcat smiled. He did not tell her that The Whisperer's queerly padded shoulders had concealed a specially constructed parachute. Even with his hands bound, he had been able to pull the ripcord. He had landed near the shore of the river and gotten to the old ship almost as soon as the cops.

Nor would he tell old Quick Trigger until that worthy's curiosity threatened to wreck his arteries.

THE END

THE BLUE PEARLS

by MAXWELL GRANT

Norgil actually had to steal—to be honest!

CHAPTER I
NORGIL MAKES A DEAL

MIRIAM disliked Frenzel the moment she saw him.

He came backstage at the Hayrick Club while Norgil was in the office talking to the manager. A sallow man, with bulging forehead and wide jaw, he gave a sharp-eyed look at Norgil's half-packed apparatus and let a half-amused smile play over his darkish lips.

Frenzel didn't see Miriam. She was behind a curtain, packing Norgil's Chinese costume. She decided to stay there, because she wondered what anyone was doing around the Hayrick Club in the middle of the afternoon. If the sallow caller started to trifle with any of the equipment, it was Miriam's intention to step through the curtains and challenge him.

Then, unwillingly, Miriam became an eavesdropper. Frenzel saw Norgil coming from the office, and stepped forward to meet him. Miriam heard him give his name and mention a telephone call, which brought a nod from Norgil. In a moment,

the two were in front of the curtain, resuming a subject that they had evidently discussed in part across the telephone.

"I'm glad you're interested, Norgil," Frenzel confided, in an oily tone that he accompanied with a gold-toothed gleam. "If anyone can pick up those pearls, you're the man."

They had turned, so that Miriam could see Norgil's face. Suave to the tips of his pointed mustache, Norgil was outmatching Frenzel in smoothness, as he asked:

"And the other gems?"

"They don't matter," replied Frenzel. "The pearls are all that interest us. Mrs. Bannishaw insured them for fifty thousand dollars. Of course, they're worth less than what she bought them. She's been trying to sell them. We've checked on the offers, and the highest was thirty thousand."

Norgil gave a slow, methodical nod, as though weighting the final sum named. At last, he questioned: "You say you've got a couple of men out at Bannishaw's?"

"Yes," admitted Frenzel, "but don't worry about them. They know what they're supposed to do. If they make any trouble for you"—his tone was harsh—"I'll take care of them."

Together, Norgil and Frenzel were walking out through the silent spaces of the deserted nightclub. Alone, Miriam found her brain flooded with the medley of thoughts.

This was Norgil's off night at the Hayrick Club. He had booked a private engagement at the Long Island home of Mrs. Ida Bannishaw, wealthy dowager who was the leading spirit of a very convivial social set. A frequent patron at the Hayrick, Mrs. Bannishaw had been highly intrigued by Norgil's clever magic act; hence had arranged her party especially for the night when he could be there.

Columnists had mentioned the scheduled soiree. It wasn't surprising to Miriam that crooks should have looked forward to the occasion in terms of Mrs. Bannishaw's famous blue pearls. For a long while, that matched necklace had been crime's target. Ida Bannishaw had given up wearing the pearls anywhere except in her own home, at the advice of her insurance company.

Nor was Miriam surprised that Frenzel should proposition Norgil on the theft of those famous pearls.

Behind Norgil's suave manner and marvelous dexterity, crooks fancied the existence of a scheming mind; they also credited Norgil with the tricky skill necessary to the execution of successful crime.

The magician encouraged that belief. Often it had enabled him to trap criminals and turn them over to the law. Still, crooks persisted in approaching Norgil; probably they thought that those who had taken trips to prison were doublecrossers who had tried to outsmart the magician.

That could account for Frenzel's direct proposal. The job of acquiring the blue pearls was being left to Norgil. The matter of Norgil's share in the proceeds hadn't been mentioned within Miriam's hearing; but she knew that Frenzel was discussing it as he and the magician strolled out through the nightclub.

WHEN Norgil returned backstage, Miriam wasn't there. It was her policy never to interfere with any of his plans, no matter how risky the undertaking. Norgil was going ahead with the packing when Miriam arrived, quite breathless, apologizing because she had spent more time than she expected on a shopping tour.

They rode to Long Island in a cab crowded by suitcases filled with props and costumes. For a while, Norgil talked about the show, but he covered that subject rather briefly. "Mrs. Bannishaw insists that I do my usual routine," he told Miriam. "Ten minutes of sleights, finishing with the borrowed watch in the nest of boxes. Then, I'll step off stage to get the gloves—"

"The gloves?" interrupted Miriam. "I usually bring them to you."

"I've decided to change that," returned Norgil. "I'll get the gloves while you return the watch to the owner. It will give me a chance for a new entry. After that, the show will be the same. I do the card sleights with gloves, and you fill in with the paper-tearing number while I change to my Chinese costume."

All that settled, Norgil came to the subject that Miriam wanted to hear about. The cab was rolling into the grounds of a large estate, when the magician remarked:

"Tonight, Miriam, you'll see the famous blue pearls. I understand that Mrs. Bannishaw is going to have them on display, around her ample neck."

Miriam smiled, then queried:

"How much are the pearls worth?"

"About two thousand each," returned Norgil. "There's two dozen of them; that would total forty-eight thousand dollars."

Miriam nodded.

"We'll call it fifty thousand," decided Norgil, "and remember this, Miriam." His tone became impressive. "I want you to keep your eye on those pearls, whenever I'm not around. Somebody might take it into his head to steal them."

The cab had reached the porte cochre of a huge mansion. A servant was opening the cab door; others were removing the luggage, so that the passengers could alight. From the bows that Norgil received, Miriam recognized that the magician was regarded as a distinguished guest.

But Miriam was staring, wondering what their departure would be like. Somehow Norgil's final words left her aghast. Despite his half-bantering tone, Miriam was convinced that Norgil actually intended to filch the Bannishaw pearls!

CHAPTER II
THE SLIGHT THAT FAILED

A DAPPER MAN greeted the arrivals when they reached the front hall. He was Mrs. Bannishaw's secretary, and he answered to the name of Claymore. Facially, he looked rather youthful, but his baldish head was a token of added years.

It was plain, too, that Claymore had spent a long while in the Bannishaw service, for the servants followed his orders and showed him marked respect. Miriam promptly decided that Claymore could be eliminated as a person in league with Frenzel.

Claymore conducted Norgil and Miriam to a small room that was fitted like an office. It had two doors, one leading in from the hallway, the other connecting with another room. Claymore locked the connecting door, but left the key in the lock.

"You won't be disturbed here," he said in a dry tone. "The ballroom is just across the hall; you can enter it by a little door, to the platform that we have arranged for you."

With Claymore gone, Norgil turned to see Miriam gazing from the rear window of the office. Joining the girl, the magician smiled. Miriam was looking enviously upon a garden scene, where guests were lounging in deck chairs, surrounding a fish pool.

Waiters were serving refreshments to the guests, who seemed quite delighted by the semitropical setting. There were parrots and macaws in cages, screeching for tidbits that were handed them, and occasionally, someone tossed bread pellets into the pool, where voracious tropical fish promptly gobbled the food.

"Stroll out and join the guests," suggested Norgil, sympathetically. "I'll get the act ready."

"But ... but—" Miriam paused, to end her stammer. "Would I be welcome?"

"As much as those chaps over there," laughed Norgil, pointing through the closed window. "I've seen them before. They're private detectives who work for the insurance company. They're trying to figure out who is going to steal the Bannishaw pearls."

Finding a roundabout route, Miriam reached the garden and chose a deck chair. Soon she was sipping champagne and nibbling caviar sandwiches along with the assorted guests. Yet as she looked toward the closed windows of the office, Miriam wondered if Norgil had a special reason for sending her outside.

While thus speculating, she saw a man stroll from the mansion. She recognized his sallow face by the glow of hanging lamps that were replacing the fading daylight. The man was Frenzel; from his smug expression, Miriam was sure that he had just held another interview with Norgil!

FRENZEL didn't have time to take a deck chair before a man wearing a chauffeur's cap approached him, gave a salute, and inquired:

"You're Mr. Frenzel?"

From the chauffeur's tone, this knowing smirk, it was obvious that he recognized Frenzel, and was merely going through a pretense. Close by, a gardener was peering over a hedge, juggling a pair of sheers, as if his day's work had been finished. A waiter paused, quite near, holding a tray of sandwiches.

It had the earmarks of a rendezvous between Frenzel and the men that he had mentioned. Miriam, snuggled deep in her chair, expected to hear something of deep interest, when Claymore's sudden arrival interrupted whatever the chauffeur had to say.

Others shifted suddenly away, as Claymore spoke brusquely to the chauffer:

"Mrs. Bannishaw is waiting to see you, Byrd."

"All right, Mr. Claymore," said Byrd, his smirk fading. Then, turning to Frenzel, the chauffeur added, apologetically, "I'm sorry, sir. I thought you were the gentleman who wanted me to meet some friends at that station."

Byrd left with Claymore. Frenzel strolled past the fish pool, giving sidelong glances at the stolid-looking detectives, who eyed him quite closely—something which pleased Miriam, then disturbed her. She was wondering if she should mention the incident to Norgil, when she heard a tap from his window, signifying that she was to return.

It was almost showtime. Miriam said nothing, as she helped Norgil carry the apparatus across the ballroom, where they found the little platform that Claymore had mentioned. Two screens formed wings at the sides of the improvised stage, and there were closed curtains at the front.

While Norgil and Miriam were making ready, a buzz beyond the curtains told that the audience had begun to assemble. With everything set, Norgil motioned Miriam behind a screen and pulled the curtains himself. Then, wearing his suavest of smiles, the magician strolled on to the platform.

Enthusiastic applause greeted the magician. Peering from the screen, Miriam saw Norgil step down from the platform to receive a gracious

handshake from Ida Bannishaw. The dowager was portly and grayhaired; around her neck, which Norgil had been mild in terming ample, she wore the famed blue pearls.

Flash bulbs puffed as newspaper photographers shot pictures of the meeting from various angles. Miriam wondered who had arranged for the cameramen, Norgil or Mrs. Bannishaw, for both were capable at getting publicity. What interested her more, however, was Norgil's gaze.

It was centered on the pearls, and for once Miriam felt a shock, despite her confidence in Norgil. The magician's eyes had a hungry glint that reminded her of a beast of prey. He seemed to be counting those pearls, as if they were choice morsels that he intended to devour.

Then, Norgil was back on the stage, and Miriam received her cue to join him. The audience was quite intrigued by the appearance of the magician's brunette assistant. Miriam was wearing a Chinese costume, a contrast to Norgil's evening clothes. Ignoring the admiring murmurs from the male members of the audience, she began to assist Norgil in his routine of sleights.

The show went perfectly. Cigarettes, thimbles, coins appeared and vanished at the tips of Norgil's fingers. Borrowing a watch, Norgil vanished it; reclaimed the timepiece from the center box of a nest that had been suspended in full view, all during the show.

He handed the watch to Miriam; told her to return it to the owner. As Miriam came back to the stage, Norgil stepped from a screen wearing a pair of white gloves. Gasps came from the audience, as the magician plucked handfuls of cards from the air. The trick seemed doubly difficult with the gloves as a handicap.

Ida Bannishaw was seated at the right of the platform. The dowager beamed with delight as Norgil stepped down, produced a fistful of cards and dropped them in her lap. Norgil requested her to turn her chair toward the audience. As Mrs. Bannishaw complied, Norgil plucked more cards from her gray hair.

All the while, Norgil was working with one hand; his right. His gloved left hand was hanging at his side. Only Miriam, chancing to glance from behind the screen, saw the singular thing that followed.

A third hand, ungloved, crept from the back of Norgil's coat. It was a left hand, moving to the right. It reached the back of Mrs. Bannishaw's neck.

Deftly, that hand took the clasp of the pearl necklace, lifted it a fraction of an inch. It was raising the clasp to the point where fingers could work upon it, unnoticed.

Imperceptible to the audience's view, the pearls were creeping up the dowager's neck, as Norgil continued with his deft procedure. But the maneuver, skillful though it was, could be sensed by Mrs. Bannishaw.

She felt the pearls creep. To Miriam's complete horror, Mrs. Bannishaw clamped her hands upon the necklace, and uttered a wild, piercing shriek!

CHAPTER III
DEATH PLAYS A HAND

NORGIL'S sleight had failed. Never, in all his career, had the magician been in such a tight spot. Gladly, Miriam would have closed her eyes, but her tension kept them open. All sorts of gasps came from the spectators; men were springing to their feet, recognizing trouble.

In all that stress, with himself as the focal point, Norgil did not lose an ounce of coolness.

His right hand was plucking more cards from the air. His left, a fake thing with an empty glove, was resting by his side. He was stepping away from Mrs. Bannishaw as his third hand, actually the missing left, whished underneath his coat.

Turning, Norgil gazed at Mrs. Bannishaw, a look of concern replacing his suave expression. Half to her feet, the dowager dropped one hand to the chair arm and looked behind her. She stared toward Norgil, saw the cards in his right hand, observed his left still lowered.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. Then waving towards the audience. "It's quite all right. It was just my imagination. I was worried"—she was smiling as she plucked the necklace—"about these precious pearls. I actually thought that someone had started to take them!"

The spectators laughed. No one could have touched those pearls. Only Norgil was close to Mrs. Bannishaw, and both of his hands were accounted for. Smiling, Norgil captured a last quota of cards from the atmosphere; letting them flutter to the platform, he strolled toward the screen where Miriam stood.

All the while, Norgil's missing hand was snugly up beneath his coat, never suspected by the audience; but behind the screen he met a defiant witness in the person of Miriam.

"I saw it!" There was emphasis to Miriam's undertone. "You were using the old pickpocket's trick of a dummy hand. You were trying to steal that necklace—"

"Just a gag," interposed Norgil, blandly. "If I did want the necklace"—his eyes met Miriam's sharply—"I wouldn't try to grab it in front of sixty people. Get out there, and do your turn. The crowd is waiting."

IN CHINESE FASHION, Miriam toddled to the center of the platform, carrying two sheets of tissue paper—one red, the other black. She tore the sheet into fragments, rolled them into a ball, and restored them in the shape of a tasseled coolie hat, which she placed on her head.

While Miriam was returning applause with a winsome smile, Norgil arrived in Chinese costume and makeup, carrying a fishing rod. He attached bait to the hook, flung the line out into the audience. A goldfish arrived, wiggling on the hook.

There were murmurs from the audience while Norgil dropped the live fish into a bowl that Miriam brought him. Another whip of the line produced another goldfish. The spectators were up from their chairs, staring amazedly at the repeated miracle. Blandly, Norgil hooked a third fish.

"I'll finish the act alone," Norgil was telling Miriam, tersely, from lips that scarcely moved. "Get the stuff from our room, and stow the dummy art at the bottom of the gray suitcase."

Lips compressed, Miriam nodded. She was angry, and wanted Norgil to know it. As soon as his act was finished, she intended to tell him all that she had heard, and demand a showdown. If he planned to go through with crooked work for Frenzel, he could wait until after Miriam had left the Bannishaw mansion.

Six fish were swimming in the bowl. Norgil tossed the fish bowl aside, and reached for a set of large steel rings that soon would link and come apart in very mystifying fashion. Holding the fish bowl into the light, Miriam threw a smile at the audience, set the bowl on a table and made a cute exit.

Her arms filled with props, among them the stuffed dummy glove, Miriam crossed the hall and reached the little office. She could hear the clang of the rings, and it annoyed her. Closing the door, Miriam put the dummy hand in the gray suitcase, then began to sort the remaining apparatus.

Vaguely, she heard voices. They came from beyond the connecting door that Claymore had locked. The voices stopped as Miriam listened. Odd, she thought, that people should be in that other room while the show was going on. Odd, too, the thudding sound, that came from beyond the door.

The little office was dim, lighted by a single lamp. Miriam stole toward the connecting door, keeping well away from the window, where a glow entered from the illuminated garden. Stealthily, she turned the key, then the knob. Opening the door was a problem that made her hesitate because of the light behind her, but finally she risked it.

Peering through the crack of the partly opened door, Miriam saw that the room beyond was dark. Its absolute silence denoted, too, that it was empty. Whoever had been there had probably gone out thorough another door, leading to the hall.

There was something, though, upon the floor; something that Miriam couldn't see very well because her own form blocked the light. Stepping into the room, Miriam approached the object, then stepped aside to let it show white in the light.

A moment later, she was horror-struck; too terrified to rise from the kneeling position that she had assumed. She was staring at the pale thing on the floor, her eyes wide open as she recognized it.

Miriam was looking at the pale, dead face of Byrd, the chauffeur who had tried to speak to Frenzel!

CHAPTER IV
CRIME STRIKES HOME

FAINTLY, as if from a far-off world, Miriam could hear the clash of steel. Norgil was in the middle of the ring routine, banging those solid loops, twisting them as if his whole future depended on the trick's success.

Here on the floor lay the real index to Norgil's future. Soon, Norgil's show would be a trivial recollection of the past; he would stand accused of murder!

The trip that Norgil had made from the platform, to change into the Chinese costume, would be sufficient to incriminate him—unless Miriam could somehow find evidence to prove that Norgil was not responsible for the crime.

Grimly, the girl remembered something that Frenzel had said, back at the Hayrick Club:

"If they make any trouble for you, I'll take care of them–"

The words were repeating themselves, over and over, in Miriam's memory. By "they," Frenzel had meant persons posted here at Bannishaw's. Miriam pictured three that she had seen very close to Frenzel–a chauffeur, a gardener and a waiter. Of the three, one was dead: Byrd, the chauffeur.

Byrd had made trouble. Someone had taken care of him. But it wouldn't be for Norgil's benefit. With murder done, crooks would hope to plant theft on Norgil, that he might take full blame. Bravely, Miriam decided that the first way to nullify that plan was to learn how Byrd had died.

Probing, she found blood upon the chauffeur's shirtfront. Looking more closely, Miriam saw a gaping wound, and knew that a knife had been driven to the victim's heart.

But the knife wasn't anywhere about. The killer had withdrawn it and made his exit while Miriam had been delaying her venture to this darkened room.

More distinct than the faint clatter of the Chinese rings, Miriam heard a creeping sound, back in the room that she had left. It could only be the murderer: he must have rounded the hallway and sneaked into the office from that direction.

Rigid, Miriam listened. The creep was fading away. Forgetting that the connection door must have betrayed her discovery of Byrd's body, Miriam hurried boldly toward the office. She was too late; the door to the hallway was closing.

Halfway to that very door, Miriam stopped.

It wouldn't do to rush out right into the arms of a killer who might be lurking in wait. Whether it was Frenzel or one of his friends, the result would prove disastrous, unless she prepared to make it otherwise.

Remembering a stage pistol in one of Norgil's suitcases, Miriam hurriedly obtained it. The gun wasn't loaded, but it would do for a bluff. Probably the killer's nerves were as tense as Miriam's own. She actually hoped that the murderer had remained in the hallway during the few minutes that she had wasted.

Reaching the door, Miriam gripped the knob. She felt it yield too easily; on an impulse she yanked the door inward. A crouching man came with it; before he could recover from his sprawl, Miriam had him covered. Triumphantly, the brunette eyed her captive as he lifted his hands.

The man was Frenzel!

THERE was an ugly glint to the fellow's eyes; his hands looked itchy, as if both wanted to reach for a gun at once. Miriam gestured him back across the office, toward the connecting door. Low, firmly, she ordered:

"Turn around."

Frenzel obeyed. Miriam poked his back with the pistol, forcing him through the doorway. As she guided him away from the light, Byrd's body showed in grim display. Frenzel turned half about; his sallow face had turned as white as the dead man's.

"No, no!" he began, in quavering tone. "If you'll only listen—"

"I'm listening," interrupted Miriam. She jabbed the gun toward Frenzel's heart. "Go right ahead. Confess that you killed Byrd!"

Frenzel's jitters ended. With a snarl, he made a frenzied dive, half across Byrd's body. He caught Miriam's wrist, shoving the empty gun upward. Unable to fire if she had wished to, Miriam took a back step, wrenched her hand away, as Frenzel stumbled over Byrd's shoulder.

Slugging downward with all the strength she could give, Miriam found the target that she wanted—Frenzel's broad forehead. The blow ended his stumble; it felled him. Coiled at Miriam's feet, Frenzel lay as inert as Byrd. Finding that he wasn't faking, Miriam stepped to the connection door and closed it.

THE gun tucked beneath her Chinese jacket, Miriam groped to the hallway door. She was afraid to go through the office because of possible accomplices outside its door. Reaching the hall, Miriam looked into the main door of the ballroom.

She saw the two detectives, standing close by. Beyond were the spectators, no longer in their chairs. Norgil had just finished the show, the curtains were closing. Ida Bannishaw was near the platform, both hands raised, calling out that she had an important announcement.

Miriam's first impulse was to double back through the hall and meet Norgil in the office that served as a drawing room. The sight of Mrs. Bannishaw halted her. The dowager looked very important, with the blue pearls gleaming at her neck. It might be that what she had to say would prove important, too.

"There will be a reception in the garden," shrilled Mrs. Bannishaw, "where we can all meet Norgil, and compliment him upon his remarkable performance. To the garden, everyone."

People turned. Miriam's eyes and those of a few others were still on Mrs. Bannishaw when the portly lady gave a scream far louder than the one that she had uttered earlier. Miriam spied the thing that many others saw, as they swung about.

A hand, thrust through the curtains, had caught hold of the blue pearl necklace. Boldly, it paused; then whipped the valued string clear of the neck that wore it. Snakelike, the necklace lashed the air, dangled a moment, then was gone!

Detectives lunged toward the curtains, in the midst of a dozen other men. As they reached the platform, every light in the ballroom was extinguished, pressed by a hand beyond the curtains!

CHAPTER V
MURDER EVIDENCE

DOUBLING around through the hall, Miriam could see a throng stumble through from the platform. They came by the little door that she and Norgil had used to reach the improvised stage. Though the hall, too, was dark, they were visible, for the door was open to the office that Norgil had been given as a dressing room.

Norgil was stepping to the doorway as they came, still in his Chinese costume, a batch of steel rings hanging from his arm. As men grabbed at him, he warded them aside, the natural thing to do against such a furious onslaught.

The rings became missiles, as Norgil backed away. Not only did men dodge as he flung the loops of steel; they tripped in the bouncing rings, stumbling as they neared him, until one attacker, emboldened by the throng behind him, came leaping forward with tight clenched fists.

It was Claymore. The secretary made a few wild

The rings became missiles as Norgil backed away!

punches–then staggered away at Norgil's first swing. Striking against the floor lamp, Claymore overturned it, thereby providing the chance that others wanted.

Smashing, the lamp was immediately extinguished. In the darkness, detectives and others fell upon Norgil and flattened him. Claymore reached the window, smashed it with a smaller lamp that he had gathered from a table. He was flinging his arms wildly, shouting for help from outside, when others reached him with the news that Norgil was a prisoner.

Persons appeared in the garden. They were the ones who had started there, when the excitement began in the ballroom. Peering through the window, they learned what had happened. Their services weren't needed. Norgil was seated, quite subdued, amid a ring of captors.

They searched him for the necklace, but did not find a trace of it–until they probed an open suitcase. From the folds of a silk handkerchief, a blue bead fell and rolled along the floor. It was one of the missing pearls! The searches found three more.

Blandly, Norgil shook his head when detectives demanded that he produce the remaining pearls. There were no more, he said, and his smile increased as he let his gaze rove the room.

Then came the discovery of other gems, packed in the gray suitcase. Claymore recognized them. Looking about, the secretary said, hoarsely:

"Mrs. Bannishaw can identify these. Where is she?"

Learning that Mrs. Bannishaw had collapsed and been carried to her room, Claymore explained matters himself.

"They came from the safe," he said. "Norgil must have opened it. We'll find out when we look. The safe is in the adjoining room."

A detective opened the door and found an electric light switch. He pressed it, but no one looked in the direction that Claymore pointed, where a small wall safe gaped wide. Everyone was staring at the floor, where Byrd's body, gory in the light, was far more horrible than when Miriam had viewed it.

Frenzel was seated beside the body, rubbing a large bump on his forehead. He looked dazed, and Miriam bit her lips when she heard the buzz that came from onlookers. She had botched things badly, slugging Frenzel.

It looked as if the sallow man had been a victim of the same attacker who had slain Byrd. All eyes were turned toward Norgil as the two detectives lifted Frenzel to his feet. Though Norgil's suavity was still apparent, it was very far below par. Miriam had never seen him look so nearly helpless at that moment when Frenzel was sagging in the grip of lifting hands.

Then came a shout from the office. Searches had made another discovery; they were bringing a makeup towel from Norgil's gray bag. They had found it buried deep, and they were holding its contents on display.

Thrust beneath Norgil's eyes was the knife that had been missing when Miriam found Byrd's body. The blood that dyed the blade was proof that it was the death weapon.

Norgil tilted back his head and laughed.

From the stares men gave him, it was plain that they thought the magician's brain had cracked under the strain of overwhelming evidence. Miriam almost thought so; at least, she didn't understand the laugh–until she noticed Norgil's eyes. They were gazing straight at Frenzel, who had recovered form his stupor.

The laugh must have cleared the cobwebs from the sallow man's senses. He stared at Byrd's body, then at Norgil. Detectives were clamping handcuffs on Norgil's wrists; Frenzel leaped in between them. Miriam shrieked, despite herself, thinking that the man was starting another murderous attack.

Her surprise was complete when the detectives stepped back under Frenzel's persuasion, listening attentatively to the statements that the sallow man was pouring into their ears. Norgil, unmolested, was reaching into a pocket beneath his Chinese robe, to get a cigarette.

It was Frenzel who offered him a light!

CALMLY gesturing to the knife that lay in the towel, Norgil made the comment:

"You won't find my fingerprints on that."

"Of course not!" It was Claymore who blurted the accusation. "You were wearing gloves when you killed Byrd!"

"Gloves?" purred Norgil. "Why should anyone have needed gloves, when he intended to wipe the knife handle on a makeup towel?"

Something in Norgil's serenity impressed the others, though it made Claymore fume.

"As for the safe"—Norgil was gesturing toward the wall—"the man who killed Byrd unquestionably planted its contents in my bag, along with the knife."

"What about the pearls?" demanded Claymore. "They came from Mrs. Bannishaw's necklace, after you stole it!"

"Not so fast." Norgil was looking at the pearls. "Those four pearls were missing from the necklace when Mrs. Bannishaw wore it tonight. Suppose you call the newspaper office"—he was turning to Frenzel—"and ask them to check the photographs that they took from different angles. There were only twenty pearls on the necklace. I counted them."

Sheer boldness, it appeared, was carrying Norgil through: but listeners were inclined to believe him. He had performed mysteries for their benefit only a half hour before; now, he was unraveling one. Norgil's cause was in the balance; one more stroke of showmanship would clench it. Coolly, Norgil provided the very element needed.

"I begin to understand the circumstances," said the magician. "Someone seized Mrs. Bannishaw's necklace, with its twenty pearls, and headed across the hall. I was trapped, but didn't have the pearls. Suppose"–he smiled to the entire group–"that I regained those pearls from a place where I could not possibly have placed them. Would that convince you of my innocence?"

It would. Most of the listeners agreed to it. Norgil turned to Miriam.

"We're going to the garden," he said. "Bring the

fish pole that I used in the Chinese act. Stay right with me, Claymore"—he gripped the secretary's arm—"because I know that you are going to appreciate this experiment."

Norgil was standing beside the outdoor fish pool when Miriam arrived with the pole. Baiting the hook with a pellet of bread that was lying by the pool, Norgil flung the line into the water. A dozen fish snapped at the bait. Norgil yanked the unlucky winner from the pool.

Finishing the fish by thwacking its head against the pool edge, Norgil handed it to one of the detectives, with the order to cut it open. The dick looked at Frenzel, who nodded. Slitting the fish, the detective made a grab at something blue. Catching it, he opened his fist—to stare at a missing pearl!

"Luck on the first cast," remarked Norgil. "We shall find nineteen more fish that gobbled pearls, when the shower of unusual food came from the window—"

He was pointing to the office window that Claymore had smashed before giving the unneeded shout for help. Claymore had acted frantically then; he was really frenzied now. Not waiting to hear the rest, the drab secretary whipped a revolver from his hip, and yelled:

"Stand where you are!"

Everyone obeyed the order except the man who uttered it. Claymore had forgotten the hand that again clutched his elbow. The hand was Norgil's.

A QUICK forearm shove from the magician, plus a sidekick against the secretary's ankle, and Claymore was no longer a threat. He was floundering, gun and all, in the fish pool, and half a dozen men were piling in to suppress him. He was half-drowned and bedraggled when they brought him out, totally unable to admit the crimes that he could no longer deny.

Norgil covered those details as he rode back to town with Miriam and Frenzel, with the luggage following in another cab. As a prelude, Miriam found out, to her amazement, who Frenzel really was. The sallow man was general manager of the insurance company that had issued the fifty thousand dollar policy on the Bannishaw pearls. The men that he had mentioned weren't accomplices; they were the detectives stationed at the mansion.

"You are right," Norgil told Frenzel. "With the policy expiring in a few days, Ida Bannishaw saw her chance to collect fifty thousand dollars, almost twice the best offer given her, and keep the pearls as well.

"When you offered me five hundred dollars to get the necklace and turn it over to you, I knew that the plan was safe enough. If honest, Ida Bannishaw would have accepted explanations; if crooked, she wouldn't have dared to make trouble.

"But when I saw that there were only twenty pearls—when I tested the clasp and found it wouldn't open—I changed the plan. I was relying upon Miriam"—he gave the girl a smiling glance—"to watch the pearls during the few minutes that I took to change my costume. It happened that Miriam had run into problems of her own."

"Like I did," acknowledged Frenzel, rubbing his forehead, "and our misadventures happened to fit with Claymore's plan. He planted the knife, along with the jewels and the extra pearls, before Miriam and I met."

"Which gave him his big chance," added Norgil, "to grab the necklace that Ida Bannishaw had so obligingly unclasped, and lead the trail to me."

"But what about Byrd?" asked Miriam. "Did Mrs. Bannishaw tell Claymore to murder him?"

"I doubt it," put in Frenzel. "Byrd guessed the game; when he tried to talk to me, Claymore took him to Mrs. Bannishaw. She probably agreed to pay him for silence, but Claymore, confident that he could frame Norgil, decided on a cheaper way."

Miriam sighed as she turned to Norgil.

"How stupid I was!" she exclaimed. "I actually thought you were being hired to become a crook!"

"So I was," smiled Norgil. "By Ida Bannishaw!"

THE END

Walter Gibson

"The Blue Pearls" features an early teaming of Shadow novelist Walter B. Gibson (1897-1985) and artist Earl Mayan (1916-2009), who in 1940 succeeded his friend Edd Cartier as *Shadow* interior illustrator.

The ghost writer of magicians Harry Houdini, Joe Dunninger, Howard Thurston and Harry Blackstone, Gibson built upon his lifelong fascination with prestidigitation in crafting the Norgil stories in *Crime Busters* and *Mystery Magazine.* Gibson's first magic publication, *The Linking Rings,* was named for the magic props featured in this tale.

Earl Mayan later rose to the upper ranks of American illustrators, producing cover paintings for *The Saturday Evening Post, McCall's, True* and *Argosy*, along with paperback covers for such classics as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* In the 1960s, Mayan reteamed with The Shadow's raconteur, illustrating Walter Gibson's short stories for *The Twilight Zone* and *The Twlight Zone Revisited.*

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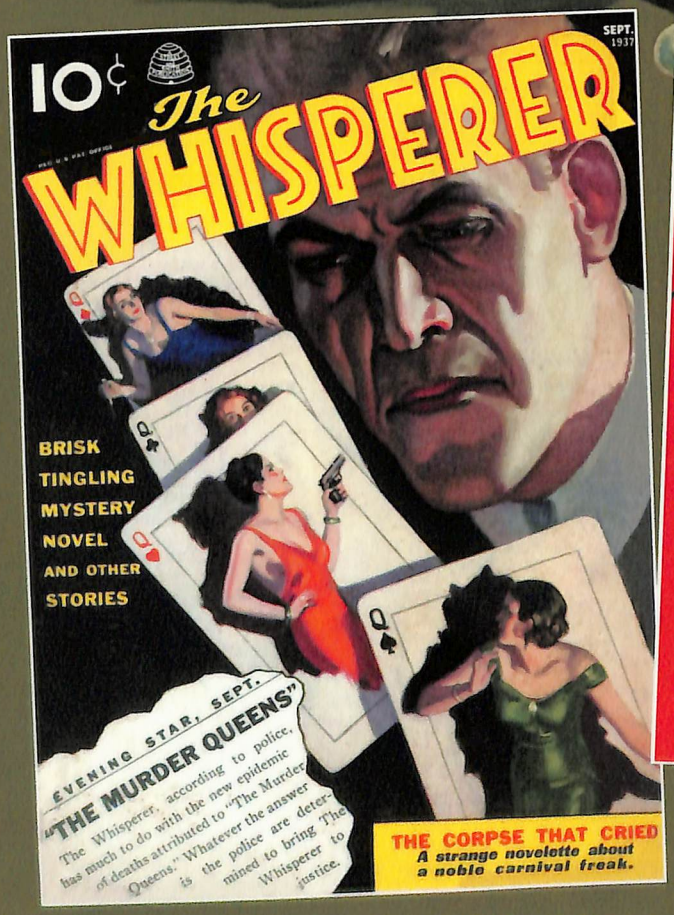

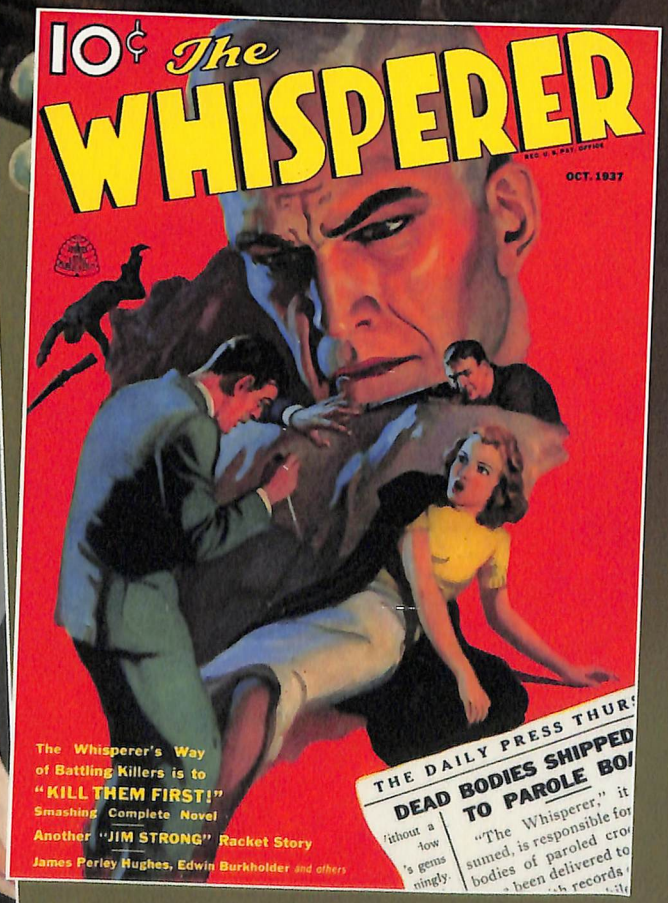

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